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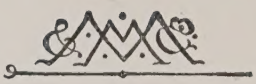
KRINDLESYKE



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KRINDLESYKE

BY WILFRID GIBSON

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TO

CATHERINE AND LASCELLES ABERCROMBIE

NOTE

On the occasion of an obscure dramatic presentation, an early and rudimentary draft of Book I. was published in 1910. It has since been entirely re-written. Book II., written 1919-22, has not been printed hitherto. Though the work was not conceived with a view to stage-production, the author reserves the acting rights.

It may be added that, while "Krindlesyke" is not in dialect, it has been flavoured with a sprinkling of local words; but as these are, for the most part, words expressive of emotion, rather than words conveying information, the sense of them should be easily gathered even by the south-country reader.

W. G.

PRELUDE

Four bleak stone walls, an eaveless, bleak stone roof,
Like a squared block of native crag, it stands,
Hunched, on skirlnaked, windy fells, aloof:
Yet, was it built by patient human hands:
Hands, that have long been dust, chiselled each stone,
And bedded it secure; and from the square
Squat chimneystack, hither and thither blown,
The reek of human fires still floats in air,
And perishes, as life on life burns through.
Squareset and stark to every blast that blows,
It bears the brunt of time, withstands anew
Wildfires of tempest and league-scouring snows,
Dour and unshaken by any mortal doom,
Timeless, unstirred by any mortal dream:
And ghosts of reivers gather in the gloom
About it, muttering, when the lych-owls scream.

"From one generation to another."

BOOK I

PHŒBE BARRASFORD

BOOK I

PHŒBE BARRASFORD

Krindlesyke is a remote shepherd's cottage on the Northumbrian fells, at least three miles from any other habitation. It consists of two rooms, a but and a ben. EZRA BARRASFORD, *an old herd, blind and decrepit, sits in an armchair in the but, or living-room, near the open door, on a mild afternoon in April.* ELIZA BARRASFORD, *his wife, is busy, making griddle-cakes over the peat fire.*

ELIZA (*glancing at the wag-at-the-wa'*) : It's hard on
three o'clock, and they'll be home
Before so very long now.
EZRA : Eh, what's that?
ELIZA : You're growing duller every day. I said
They'd soon be home now.
EZRA : They? And who be they?
ELIZA : My faith, you've got a memory like a milk-sile!
You've not forgotten Jim's away to wed?
You're not that dull.
EZRA : We cannot all be needles:
And some folk's tongues are sharper than their wits.
Yet, till thon spirt of hot tar blinded me,
No chap was cuter in all the countryside,
Or better at a bargain; and it took

A nimble tongue to bandy words with mine.
You'd got to be up betimes to get round Ezra:
And none was a shrewder judge of ewes, or women.
My wits just failed me once, the day I married:
But, you're an early riser, and your tongue
Is always up before you, and with an edge,
Unblunted by the dewfall, and as busy
As a scythe in the grass at Lammas. So Jim's away
To wed, is he, the limb? I thought he'd gone
For swedes; though now, I mind some babblement
About a wedding: but, nowadays, words tumble
Through my old head like turnips through a slicer;
And naught I ken who the bowdykite's to wed—
Some bletherskite he's picked up in a ditch,
Some fond fligary flirtigig, clarty-fine,
Who'll turn a slattern-shrew and a cap-river
Within a week, if I ken aught of Jim.
Unless . . . Nay, sure, 'twas Judith Ellershaw.

ELIZA: No, no; you're dull, indeed. It's Phœbe Martin.

EZRA: Who's Phœbe Martin? I ken naught of her.

ELIZA: And I, but little.

EZRA: Some trapsing tatterwallops,
I'll warrant. Well, these days, the lads are like
The young cockgrouse, who doesn't consult his dad
Before he mates. In my—yet, come to think,
I didn't say overmuch. My dad and mammy
Scarce kenned her name when I sprung my bride on them;
Just loosed on them a gisseypig out of a poke
They'd heard no squeak of. They'd to thole my choice,

Lump it or like it. I'd the upper hand then:
And well they kenned their master. No tawse to chide,
Nor apron-strings to hold young Ezra then:
His turn had come; and he was cock of the midden,
And no braw cockerel's hustled him from it yet,
For all their crowing. The blind old bird's still game.
They've never had his spirit, the young cheepers,
Not one; and Jim's the lave of the clutch; and he
Will never lord it at Krindlesyke till I'm straked.
But this what's-her-name the gaby's bringing . . .

ELIZA: Phœbe.

EZRA: A posical name; I never heard the like.
She'll be a flighty faggit, mark my words.

ELIZA: She's only been here once before; and now
She'll be here all the time. I'll find it strange
With another woman in the house. Needs must
Get used to it. Your mother found it strange,
Likely . . . It's my turn now, and long in coming.
Perhaps, that makes it harder. I've got set
Like a vane, when the wind's blown east so long, it's clogged
With dust, and cannot whisk with the chopping breeze.
'Twill need a wrench to shift my bent; for change
Comes sore and difficult at my time of life.

EZRA: Ay, you may find your nose put out of joint,
If she's a spirited wench.

ELIZA: Due east it's blown
Since your mother died. She barely outlived my coming;
And never saw a grandchild. I wonder . . . Yet,

I spared her all I could. Ay, that was it:
She couldn't abide to watch me trying to spare her,
Another woman doing her work, finoodling
At jobs she'd do so smartly, tidying her hearth,
Using her oven, washing her cups and saucers,
Scouring her tables, redding up her rooms,
Handling her treasures, and wearing out her gear.
And now, another, wringing out my dishclout,
And going about my jobs in her own fashion;
Turning my household, likely, howthery-towthery,
While I sit mum. But it takes forty years'
Steady east wind to teach some folk; and then
They're overdried to profit by their learning.
And so, without a complaint, and keeping her secrets,
Your mother died with patient, quizzical eyes,
Half-pitying, fixed on mine; and dying, left
Krindlesyke and its gear to its new mistress.

EZRA: A woman, she was. You've never had her hand
At farls and bannocks; and her singing-hinnies
Fair melted in the mouth—not sad and soggy
As yours are like to be. She'd no habnab
And hitty-missy ways; and she'd turn to,
At shearing-time, and clip with any man.
She never spared herself.

ELIZA: And died at forty,
As white and worn as an old table-cloth,
Darned, washed, and ironed to a shred of cobweb,
Past mending; while your father was sixty-nine
Before he could finish himself, soak as he might.

EZRA: Don't you abuse my father. A man, he was—

No fonder of his glass than a man should be.
Few like him now: I've not his guts, and Jim's
Just a lamb's head, gets half-cocked on a thimble,
And mortal, swilling an eggcupful; a gill
Would send him randy, reeling to the gallows.
Dad was the boy! Got through three bottles a day,
And never turned a hair, when his own master,
Before we'd to quit Rawridge, because the dandy
Had put himself outside of all his money—
Teeming it down his throat in liquid gold,
Swallowing stock and plenishing, gear and graith.
A bull-trout's gape and a salamander thrapple—
A man, and no mistake!

ELIZA: A man; and so,
She died; and since your mother was carried out,
Hardly a woman's crossed the threshold, and none
Has slept the night at Krindlesyke. Forty-year,
With none but men! They've kept me at it; and now
Jim's bride's to take the work from my hands, and do
Things over that I've done over for forty-year,
Since I took them from your mother—things some woman's
Been doing at Krindlesyke since the first bride
Came home.

EZRA: Three hundred years since the first herd
Cut peats for that hearth's kindling. Set alow,
Once and for all, it's seen a wheen lives burn
Black-out: and when we, too, lie in the house
That never knew housewarming, 'twill be glowing.
Ay! and some woman's tongue's been going it,

Like a wag-at-the-wa', in this steading, three hundred years,
Tick-tocking the same things over.
ELIZA: Dare say, we'll manage:
A decent lass—though something in her eye,
I couldn't quite make out. Hardly Jim's sort . . .
But, who can ever tell why women marry?
And Jim . . .
EZRA: Takes after me: and wenches buzz
Round a handsome lad, as wasps about a bunghole.
ELIZA: Though now they only see skin-deep, those eyes
Will search the marrow. Jim will have his hands full,
Unless she's used to menfolk and their ways,
And past the minding. She'd the quietness
That's a kind of pride, and yet, not haughty—held
Her head like a young blood-mare, that's mettlesome
Without a touch of vice. She'll gan her gait
Through this world, and the next. The bit in her teeth,
There'll be no holding her, though Jim may tug
The snaffle, till he's tewed. I've kenned that look
In women's eyes, and mares', though, with a difference.
And Jim—yet she seemed fond enough of Jim:
His daffing's likely fresh to her, though his jokes
Are last week's butter. Last week's! For forty-year
I've tholed them, all twice-borrowed, from dad and granddad,
And rank, when I came to Krindlesyke, to find
Life, the same jobs and same jests over and over.
EZRA: A notion, that, to hatch, full-fledged and crowing!

You must have brooded, old clocker.
ELIZA: True enough,
Marriage means little more than a new gown
To some: but Phœbe's not a fancicle tauntril,
With fingers itching to hansel new-fangled flerds.
Why she'd wed . . .
EZRA: Tuts! Girls take their chance. And you'd
Conceit enough of Jim, at one time—proud
As a pipit that's hatched a cuckoo: and if the gowk
Were half as handsome as I—you ken, yourself,
You needed no coaxing: I wasted little breath
Whistling to heel: you came at the first "Isca!"
ELIZA: Who kens what a lass runs away from, crazed to quit
Home, at all hazards, little realizing
It's life, itself, she's trying to escape;
And plodging deeper.
EZRA: Trust a wench for kenning.
I've to meet the wife who'd be a maid again:
Once in the fire, no wife, though she may crackle
On the live coals, leaps back to the frying-pan.
It's against nature.
ELIZA: Maybe: and yet, somehow,
Phœbe seemed different.
EZRA: I've found little difference
Betwixt one gimmer and another gimmer,
When the ram's among them. But, where does she hail from?
ELIZA: Allendale way. Jim met her at Martinmas fair.
EZRA: We met . . .

ELIZA: Ay, fairs have much to answer for.
EZRA: I thought 'twas Judith Ellershaw.
ELIZA: God forbid
'Twas Judith I'd to share with: though Jim fancied
The lass, at one time. He's had many fancies:
Light come, light go, it's always been with Jim.
EZRA: And I was gay when I was young—as brisk
As a yearling tup with the ewes, till I'd the pains,
Like red-hot iron, clamping back and thighs.
My heart's a younker's still; but even love
Gives in, at last, to rheumatics and lumbago.
Now, I'm no better than an old bell-wether,
A broken-winded, hirpling tattyjack
That can do nothing but baa and baa and baa.
I'd just to whistle for a wench at Jim's age:
And Jim's . . .
ELIZA: His father's son.
EZRA: He's never had
My spirit. No woman's ever bested me.
For all his bluster, he's a gaumless nowt,
With neither guts nor gall. He just butts blindly—
A woolly-witted ram, bashing his horns,
And spattering its silly brains out on a rock:
No backbone—any trollop could twiddle him
Round her little finger: just the sort a doxy,
Or a drop too much, sets dancing, heels in air:
He's got the gallows' brand. But none of your sons
Has a head for whisky or wenches; and not one
Has half my spunk, my relish. I'd not trust
Their judgment of a ewe, let alone a woman:

But I could size a wench up, at a glance ;
And Judith . . .
ELIZA: Ay : but Krindlesyke would be
A muckheap-lie-on, with that cloffy slut
For mistress. But she flitted one fine night.
EZRA : Rarely the shots of the flock turn lowpy-dyke ;
Likelier the tops have the spunk to run ramrace ;
And I think no worse . . .
ELIZA : Her father turned her out,
'Twas whispered ; and he's never named her, since :
And no one's heard a word. I couldn't thole
The lass. She'd big cow-eyes : there's little good
In that sort. Jim's well shot of her ; he'll not
Hear tell of her : that sort can always find
Another man to fool : they don't come back :
Past's past, with them.
EZRA : I liked . . .
ELIZA : Ay, you're Jim's dad.
But now he's settling down, happen I'll see
Bairn's bairns at Krindlesyke, before I die.
Six sons—and only the youngest of the bunch
Left in the old home to do his parents credit.
EZRA : Queer, all went wild, your sons, like collies bitten
With a taste for mutton bleeding-hot. Cold lead
Cures dogs of that kidney, peppering them one fine night
From a chink in a stell ; but, when they're two-legged curs,
They've a longer run ; and, in the end, the gallows
Don't noose them, kicking and squealing like snarled rabbits,

Dead-certain, as 'twould do in the good old days.

ELIZA: You crack your gallows-jokes on your own sons—

And each the spit of the father that drove them wild,
With cockering them and cursing them; one moment,
Fooling them to their bent, the moment after,
Flogging them senseless, till their little bodies
Were one blue bruise.

EZRA: I never larruped enough,
But let the varmints off too easily:
That was the mischief. They should have had my dad—
An arm like a bullock-walloper, and a fist
Could fell a stot; and faiks, but he welted me
Skirlnaked, yarked my hurdies till I yollered,
In season and out, and made me the man I am.
Ay, he'd have garred the young eels squirm.

ELIZA: And yet,
My sons, as well: though I lost my hold of each
Almost before he was off my lap, with you
To egg them on against me. Peter went first:
And Jim's the lave. But he may settle down.
God kens where you'd be, if you'd not wed young.

EZRA: And the devil where you'd be, if we hadn't met
That hiring-day at Hexham, on the minute.
I'd spent last hiring with another wench,
A giggling red-haired besom; and we were trysted
To meet at the Shambles: and I was awaiting her,
When I caught the glisk of your eye: but she was late;

And you were a sonsy lassie, fresh and pink ;
Though little pink about you now, I'd fancy.
ELIZA : Nay, forty-year of Krindlesyke, and all !
EZRA : Young carroty-pow must have been in a fine fantigue,
When she found I'd mizzled. Yet, if she'd turned up
In time, poor mealy-face, for all your roses,
You'd never have clapped eyes on Krindlesyke :
This countryside and you would still be strangers.
ELIZA : In time !
EZRA : A narrow squeak.
ELIZA : If she'd turned up,
The red-haired girl had lived at Krindlesyke,
Instead of me, this forty-year : and I—
I might . . . But we must dree our weird. And yet,
To think what my life might have been, if only—
The difference !
EZRA : Ay, and hers, "if ifs and ans !"
But I'm none certain she'd have seen it, either.
I could have had her without wedding her,
And no mistake, the nickering, red-haired baggage.
Though she was merry, she'd big rabbit-teeth,
Might prove gey ill to live with ; ay, and a swarm
Of little sandy moppies like their doe,
Buck-teeth and freckled noses and saucer-eyes,
Gaping and squealing round the table at dinner,
And calling me their dad, as likely as not :
Though little her mug would matter, now I'm blind ;
And by this there'll scarce be a stump in her yellow gums,
And not a red hair to her nodding poll—

That shock of flame a shrivelled, grizzled wisp
Like bracken after a heathfire; that creamy skin,
Like a plucked hen's. But she'd a merry eye,
The giglet; and that coppertop of hers
Was good to think on of a nippy morning:
While you—but you were young then . . .

ELIZA: Young and daft.

EZRA: Nay, not so gite; for I was handsome then.

ELIZA: Ay, the braw birkie of that gairishon
Of menseless slubberdegullions: and I trusted
My eyes, and other people's tongues, in those days:
And you'd a tongue to glaver a guff of a girl,
The devil's own; and whatever's gone from you,
You've still a tongue, though with a difference:
Now it's all edge.

EZRA: The knife that spreads the butter
Will slice the loaf. But it's sharper than my teeth.

ELIZA: Ay, tongues cut deeper than any fang can bite,
Sore-rankling wounds.

EZRA: You talk of tongues! I'm deaf:
But, for my sins, I cannot be deaf to yours,
Nattering me into my grave; and, likely, your words
Will flaffer about my lugs like channering peesweeps,
When I lie cold.

ELIZA: Yes, I was young, and agape
For your wheedling flum, till it fleeched my self from me.
There's something in a young girl seems to work
Against her better sense, and gives her up,
Almost in spite of her.

EZRA: It's nature.

ELIZA : Then
Nature has more than enough to answer for.
Young, ay ! And you, as gallant as the stallion,
With ribboned tail and mane, that pranced to the crack
Of my father's whip, when first I saw you gaping,
Kenspeckle in that clamjamfrey of copers.
EZRA : Love at first sight !
ELIZA : And I was just as foolish
As you were braw.
EZRA : Well, we'd our time of it,
Fools, or no fools. And you could laugh in those days,
And didn't snigger like the ginger fizgig.
Your voice was a bird's : but you laugh little now ;
And—well, maybe, your voice is still a bird's.
There's birds and birds. Then, 'twas a cushy-doo's
That's brooding on her nest, while the red giglet's
Was a gowk's at the end of June. Do you call to mind
We sat the livelong day in a golden carriage,
Squandering a fortune, forby the tanner I dropt ?
They wouldn't stop to let me pick it up ;
And when we alighted from the roundabout,
Some skunk had pouched it : may he pocket it
Red-hot in hell through all eternity !
If I'd that fortune now safe in my kist !
But I was a scatterpenny : and you were bonnie—
Pink as a dog-rose were your plump cheeks then :
Your hair'd the gloss and colour of clean straw :
And when, at darkening, the naphtha flares were kindled,
And all the red and blue and gold aglitter—

Drums banging, trumpets braying, rattles craking;
And we were rushing round and round, the music—
The music and the dazzle . . .

ELIZA: Ay: that was it—
The rushing and the music and the dazzle.
Happen 'twas on a roundabout that Jim
Won Phœbe Martin.

EZRA: And when you were dizzy,
And all a hazegaze with the hubblyshew;
You cuddled up against me, snug and warm:
And round and round we went—the music braying
And beating in my blood: the gold aglitter . . .

ELIZA: And there's been little dazzle since, or music.

EZRA: But I was merry, till I fetched you home,
To swarm the house with whinging wammerels.

ELIZA: You fetched me from my home. If I'd but known
Before I crossed the threshold. I took my arles,
And had to do my darg. And another bride
Comes now. They'll soon be here: the train was due
At half-past one: they'd walk it in two hours,
Though bride and groom.

EZRA: I wish he'd married Judith.
Cow-eyed, you called the wench; but cows have horns,
And, whiles, they use them when you least expect.
'Twould be no flighty heifer you'd to face,
If she turned mankeen. But, I liked the runt.
Jim might do worse.

ELIZA: You liked . . . But come, I'll set
Your chair outside, where you can feel the sun;
And hearken to the curlew; and be the first

To welcome Jim and Phœbe as man and wife.
Come!

EZRA: Are the curlew calling?

ELIZA: Calling? Ay!
And they've been at it all the blessed day,
As on the day I came to Krindlesyke.
Likely the new bride—though 'twasn't at the time
I noticed them: too heedless and new-fangled.
She may be different: she may hear them now:
They're noisy enough.

EZRA: I cannot catch a note:
I'm getting old, and deaved as well as darkened.
When I was young, I liked to hear the whaups
Calling to one another down the slacks:
And I could whistle, too, like any curlew.
'Twas an ancient bird wouldn't answer my call: and now
I'm ancient myself—an old, blind, doddering heron,
Dozing his day out in a syke, while minnows
Play tiggy round his shanks and nibble his toes;
And the hawk hangs overhead. But then the blood
Was hot, and I'd a relish—such a relish!
Keen as a kestrel . . . and now . . .

ELIZA: It's Jim and Phœbe—
The music and the dazzle in their heads:
And they'll be here . . .

EZRA: I wish he'd married Judith:
She's none the worse for being a ruddled ewe.

ELIZA: Nay, God forbid! At least, I'm spared that bildert.

(EZRA *rises; and* ELIZA *carries out his chair, and he hobbles after her. She soon returns, and puts griddle-cakes into the oven to keep hot. Presently a step is heard on the threshold, and* JUDITH ELLERSHAW *stands in the doorway, a baby in her arms.* ELIZA *does not notice her for a few moments; then, glancing up, recognizes her with a start.*)

ELIZA: You, Judith Ellershaw! I thought 'twas Jim.

JUDITH: You thought 'twas Jim?

ELIZA: Jim and . . . To think it's you!

Where've you sprung from? It's long since you've shown face
In these parts; and we'd seen the last of you,
I reckoned, little dreaming—and, least of all,
To-day!

JUDITH: And should I be more welcome, then,
On any other?

ELIZA: Welcome? I hardly know.
Decent folk don't keep open house for your sort
At any time. Your foot's not dirtied that doorstone
A dozen times in your life: and then, to come,
To-day, of all days, just when Jim . . .
(*Breaks off abruptly.*)

JUDITH: When Jim?

ELIZA: But, don't stand there. You're looking pale and peaked.
It's heavy, traiking the fell-tracks with a baby:
Come in, and rest a moment, if you're tired.

You cannot bide here long: I'm sorry, lass;
But I'm expecting company; and you
Yourself, I take it, won't be over-eager
For company.

JUDITH: I'm tired enough, God kens—
Bone-weary: but we'll not stay long, to shame you:
And you can send us packing in good time,
Before your company comes.

(*She enters, and seats herself on a chair near the door.* ELIZA *busies herself, laying the table for tea, and there is silence for a while.*)

JUDITH: And so, Jim's gone
To fetch the company?

ELIZA: Ay, Jim has gone . . .

(*She breaks off again abruptly, and says no more for a while. Presently she goes to the oven, takes out a griddle-cake, splits and butters it, and hands it to* JUDITH.)

ELIZA: Likely, you're hungry, and could do with a bite?

JUDITH (*taking it*): I'm famished. Cake! We're grand, to-day, indeed!
And scones and bannocks—carties, quite a spread!
It's almost like a wedding.

ELIZA: A wedding, woman?
Can't folk have scones and bannocks and singing-hinnies,
But you must prate of weddings—you, and all!

JUDITH: I meant no harm. I thought, perhaps, Jim might . . .
Though, doubtless, he was married long ago?

(ELIZA *does not answer.* JUDITH'S *baby begins to whimper, and she tries to hush it in an absent manner.*)

JUDITH: Whisht, whisht! my little lass! You mustn't cry,
And shame the ears of decent folk. Whisht, whisht!

ELIZA: Why, that's no way to hush the teelytoon.
Come, give the bairn to me. Come, woman, come!
(*Taking the child from* JUDITH.)
I'll show you how to handle babies. There!

JUDITH: And you would nurse my brat?

ELIZA: A bairn's a bairn—
Ay, even though its mother . . .
(*Breaks off abruptly, and stands, gazing before her, clasping the baby to her bosom.*)

JUDITH: Why don't you finish?
"Ay, even though its mother . . ." you were saying.

ELIZA: It's ill work, calling names.

JUDITH: You needn't fear
To make me blush by calling me any name
That hasn't stung me to the quick already.
My pious father had a holy tongue;
And he had searched the Scriptures to some purpose.

ELIZA (*gazing before her in an abstracted manner*):
Ay: likely enough. . . . Poor bairn, poor little bairn—
It's strange, but, as you snuggled to my breast,
I could have fancied, a moment, 'twas Jim I held
In my arms again. I'm growing old and foolish,
To have such fancies.

JUDITH : Fancied 'twas Jim, your son—
My bastard brat?
ELIZA : Shame on you, woman, to call
Your own bairn such, poor innocent. It's not
To blame for being a chance-bairn. Yet . . . O Jim!
JUDITH : Why do you call on Jim? He's not come home yet?
But I must go, before your son brings back . . .
Give me the bairn . . .
ELIZA (*withholding the baby*): Nay, daughter, not till I learn
The father's name.
JUDITH : What right have you . . .
ELIZA : God kens . . .
And yet . . .
JUDITH : Give me the bairn. You'll never learn
The father's name from me.
ELIZA : Go, daughter, go.
What ill-chance made you come to-day, of all days?
JUDITH : Why not to-day? Come, woman, I'd ken that,
Before I go. I've half a mind to stay.
ELIZA : Nay, lass, you said . . .
JUDITH : I've said a lot, in my time.
I've changed my mind. 'Twas Jim I came to see—
Though why, God kens! I liked the singing-hinny:
Happen, there'll be some more for me, if I stay.
I find I cannot thrive on nettle-broth:
And it's not every day . . .
ELIZA : Judith, you ken.
JUDITH : Ken? I ken nothing, but what you tell me.

ELIZA: Daughter,
I'll tell you all. You'll never have the heart . . .
JUDITH: The heart!
ELIZA: To stay and shame us, when you ken all.
JUDITH: All?
ELIZA: When you talked of weddings, you'd hit the truth:
And Jim brings home his bride to-day. Even now . . .
JUDITH: And Jim brings home . . .
ELIZA: I looked for them by this:
But you've still time . . .
JUDITH: The bride comes home to-day.
Brides should come home: it's right a man should bring
His bride home—ay! And we must go, my wean,
To spare her blushes. We're no company
For bride and bridegroom. Happen, we should meet them,
You must not cry to him: I must not lift
My eyes to his. We're nothing now to him.
Your cry might tell her heart too much: my eyes
Might meet her eyes, and tell . . . It isn't good
For a bride to know too much. So, we must hide
In the ditch, as they pass by, if we should chance
To meet them on the road—their road and ours—
The same road, though we're travelling different ways.
The bride comes home. Brides come home every day.
And you and I . . .
ELIZA: There's nothing else for it.
JUDITH: There's nothing else?

ELIZA: Nay, lass! How could you bide?
They'll soon . . . But, you'll not meet them, if you go . . .
JUDITH: Go, where?
ELIZA: And how should I ken where you're bound for?
I thought you might be making home.
JUDITH: Home—home!
I might be making home? And where's my home—
Ay, and my bairn's home, if it be not here?
ELIZA: Here? You'd not stay?
JUDITH: Why not? Have I no right?
ELIZA: If you'll not go for my sake, go for Jim's.
If you were fond . . .
JUDITH: And, think you, I'd be here,
If I had not been fond of Jim? And yet,
Why should I spare him? He's not spared me much,
Who gave him all a woman has to give.
ELIZA: But, think of her, the bride, and her home-coming.
JUDITH: I'll go.
ELIZA: You lose but little: too well I ken
How little—I, who've dwelt this forty-year
At Krindlesyke.
JUDITH: Happen you never loved.
ELIZA: I, too, was young, once, daughter.
JUDITH: Ay: and yet,
You've never tramped the road I've had to travel.
God send it stretch not forty-year!

ELIZA: I've come
That forty-year. We're out on the selfsame road,
The three of us: but, she's the stoniest bit
To travel still—the bride just setting out,
And stepping daintily down the lilylea.
We've known the worst.

JUDITH: But, she can keep the highway,
While I must slink in the ditch, among the nettles.

ELIZA: I've kept the hard road, daughter, forty-year:
The ditch may be easier going, after all:
Nettles don't sting each other.

JUDITH: Nay: but I'm not
A ditch-born nettle, but, among the nettles,
Only a woman, naked to every sting:
And there are slugs and slithery toads and paddocks
In the ditch-bottom; and their slimy touch
Is worse to bear than any nettle . . .

ELIZA: Ay—
The pity of it! A maid blooms only once:
And then, that a man should ruin . . . But, you've your bairn:
And bairns, while we can hold them safe in our arms,
And they still need the breast, make up for much:
For there's a kind of comfort in their clinging,
Though they only cling till they can stand alone.
But yours is not a son. If I'd only had
One daughter . . .

JUDITH: Well, you'll have a daughter now.
But we must go our way to—God kens where!
Before Jim brings the bride home. You've your wish:
Jim brings you home a daughter . . .

(*As she speaks, a step is heard, and* EZRA BARRASFORD *appears in the doorway. Turning to go,* JUDITH *meets him. She tries to pass him, but he clutches her arm; and she stands, dazed, while his fingers grope over her.*)

EZRA: So Jim's back:
And has slipped by his old dad without a word?
I caught no footfall, though once I'd hear an adder
Slink through the bent. I'm deafer than an adder—
Deaf as the stone-wall Johnny Looney built
Around the frog that worried him with croaking.
I couldn't hear the curlew—not a note.
But I forget my manners. Jim, you dog,
To go and wed, and never tell your dad!
I thought 'twas swedes you were after: and, by gox!
It's safer fetching turnips than a wife.
But, welcome home! Is this the bonnie bride?
You're welcome, daughter, home to Krindlesyke.
(*Feeling her face.*)
But, wife, it's Judith, after all! I kenned
That Judith was the lucky lass. You said
'Twas somebody else: I cannot mind the name—
Some fly-by-the-sky, outlandish name: but I
Was right, you see. Though I be blind and deaf,
I'm not so dull as some folk think. There's others
Are getting on in years, forby old Ezra.
Though some have ears to hear the churchyard worms
Stirring beneath the mould, and think it time
That he was straked and chested, the old dobby
Is not a corpse yet: and it well may happen

He'll not be the first at Krindlesyke to lie,
Cold as a slug, with pennies on his eyes.
Aiblains, the old ram's cassen, but he's no trake yet:
And, at the worst, he'll be no braxy carcase
When he's cold mutton. Ay, I'm losing grip;
But I've still got a kind of hold on life;
And a young wench in the house makes all the difference.
We've hardly blown the froth off, and smacked our lips,
Before we've reached the bottom of the pot:
Yet the last may prove the tastiest drop, who kens?
You're welcome, daughter.

(*His hand, travelling over her shoulder, touches the child.*)

Ah, a brat—Jim's bairn!
He hasn't lost much time, has Jim, the dog!
Come, let me take it, daughter. I've never held
A grandchild in my arms. Six sons I've had,
But not one's made me granddad, to my knowledge:
And all the hoggerels have turned lowpy-dyke,
And scrambled, follow-my-leader, over the crag's edge,
But Jim, your husband: and not for me to say,
Before his wife, that he's the draft of the flock.
Give me the baby: I'll not let it fall:
I've always had a way with bairns, and women.
It's not for naught I've tended ewes and lambs,
This sixty-year.

(*He snatches the baby from* JUDITH, *before she realizes what he is doing, and hobbles away with it to the high-backed settle by the fire, out of sight. Before* JUDITH *can move to follow him, steps are heard on the threshold.*)

ELIZA: Ah, God: they're at the door!

As she speaks, JIM *and* PHŒBE BARRASFORD *enter, talking and laughing.* JUDITH ELLERSHAW *shrinks into the shadow behind the door, while they come between her and the settle on which* EZRA *is nursing the baby unseen.* ELIZA *stands dazed in the middle of the room.*

JIM: And they lived happy ever afterwards,
Eh, lass? Well, mother: I've done the trick: all's over;
And I'm a married man, copt fair and square,
Coupled to Phœbe: and I've brought her home.
You call the lass to mind, though you look moidart?
What's dozzened you? She'll find her wits soon, Phœbe:
They're in a mullock, all turned howthery-towthery
At the notion of a new mistress at Krindlesyke—
She'll come to her senses soon, and bid you welcome.
Take off your bonnet; and make yourself at home.
I trust tea's ready, mother: I'm fairly famished.
I've hardly had a bite, and not a sup
To wet my whistle since forenoon: and dod!
But getting married is gey hungry work.
I'm hollow as a kex in a ditch-bottom:
And just as dry as Molly Miller's milkpail
She bought, on the chance of borrowing a cow.
Eh, Phœbe, lass! But you've stopped laughing, have you?
And you look fleyed: there's nothing here to scare you:
We're quiet folk at Krindlesyke. Come, mother,
Have you no word of welcome for the lass,

That you gape like a foundered ewe at us? What ghost
Has given you a gliff, and set you chittering?
Come, shake yourself, before I rax your bones;
And give my bride the welcome due to her—
My bride, the lady I have made my wife.
Poor lass, she's quaking like a dothery-dick.

ELIZA (*to* PHŒBE): Daughter, may you . . .

EZRA (*crooning, unseen, to the baby*):

"Dance for your mammy,
Dance for your daddy . . ."

JIM: What ails the old runt now?
You musn't heed him, Phœbe, lass: he's blind
And old and watty: but there's no harm in him.
(*Goes towards settle.*)
Come, dad, and jog your wits, and stir your stumps,
And welcome . . . What the devil's this? Whose brat . . .

EZRA: Whose brat? And who should ken—although they say,
It's a wise father knows his own child. Ay!
If he's the devil, you're the devil's brat,
And I'm the devil's daddy. Happen you came
Before the parson had time to read the prayers.
But, he's a rum dad . . .

(JUDITH ELLERSHAW *steps forward to take the child from* EZRA.)

JIM: Judith Ellershaw!
Why, lass, where ever have . . .

(*He steps towards her, then stops in confusion. Nobody speaks as* JUDITH *goes towards the*

settle, takes the child from EZRA, *and wraps it in her shawl. She is moving to the door when* PHŒBE *steps before her and closes it, then turns and faces* JUDITH.)

PHŒBE : You shall not go.

JUDITH : And who are you to stop me? Come, make way—
Come, woman, let me pass.

PHŒBE : I—I'm Jim's bride.

JUDITH : And what should Jim's bride have to say to me?
Come, let me by.

PHŒBE : You shall not go.

JUDITH : Come, lass.
You do not ken me for the thing I am :
If you but guessed, you'd fling the door wide open,
And draw your petticoats about you tight,
Lest any draggletail of mine should smutch them.
I never should have come 'mid decent folk :
I never should have crawled out of the ditch.
You little ken . . .

PHŒBE : I heard your name. I've heard
That name before.

JUDITH : You heard no good of it,
Whoever spoke.

PHŒBE : I heard it from the lips
That uttered it just now.

JUDITH : From Jim's? Well, Jim
Kens what I am. I wonder he lets you talk
With me. Come . . .

PHŒBE : Not until I know the name
Of your baby's father.

JUDITH: You've no right to ask.
PHŒBE: Maybe: and yet, you shall not cross that doorsill,
Until I know.
JUDITH: Come, woman, don't be foolish.
PHŒBE: You say I've no right. Pray God, you speak the truth:
But there may be no woman in the world
Who has a better right.
JUDITH: You'd never heed
A doting dobby's blethering, would you, lass—
An old, blind, crazy creature . . .
PHŒBE: If I've no right,
You'll surely never have the heart to keep
The name from me? You'll set my mind at ease?
JUDITH: The heart! If it will set your mind at ease,
I'll speak my shame . . . I'll speak my shame right out . . .
I'll speak my shame right out, before you all.
JIM: But, lass!
ELIZA (*to* PHŒBE): Nay: let her go. You're young and hard:
And I was hard, though far from young: I've long
Been growing old; though little I realized
How old. And when you're old, you don't judge hardly:
You ken things happen, in spite of us, willy-nilly.
We think we're safe, holding the reins; and then
In a flash the mare bolts; and the wheels fly off;
And we're lying, stunned, beneath the broken cart.
So, let the lass go quietly; and keep

Your happiness. When you're old, you'll not let slip
A chance of happiness so easily :
There's not so much of it going, to pick and choose :
The apple's speckled ; but it's best to munch it,
And get what relish out of it you can ;
And, one day, you'll be glad to chew the core :
For all its bitterness, few chuck it from them,
While they've a sense left that can savour aught.
So, let the lass go. You may have the right
To question her : but folk who stand on their rights
Get little rest : they're on a quaking moss
Without a foothold ; and find themselves to the neck
In Deadman's Flow, before they've floundered far.
Rights go for little, in this life : few are worth
The risk of losing peace and quiet. You'll have
Plenty to worrit, and keep you wakeful, without
A pillow stuffed with burrs and briars : so, take
An old wife's counsel, daughter : let well alone ;
And don't go gathering grievances. The lass . . .

JIM : Ay, don't be hard on her. Though mother's old,
She talks sense, whiles. So let the poor lass go.

JUDITH : The father of my bairn . . .

JIM : She's lying, Phœbe !

JUDITH : The father of my bairn is—William Burn—
A stranger to these parts. Now, let me pass.

(*She tries to slip by, but* PHŒBE *still does not make way for her.*)

JIM : Ay, Phœbe, let her go. She tells the truth.
I thought . . . But I mistook her. Let her go.
I never reckoned you'd be a reesty nag :

Yet, you can set your hoofs, and champ your bit
With any mare, I see. I doubt you'll prove
A rackle ramstam wife, if you've your head.
She's answered what you asked; though, why, unless . . .
Well, I don't blame the wench: she should ken best.

PHŒBE: Judith, you lie.

JUDITH: I lie! You mean . . .

PHŒBE: To-day,
I married your bairn's father.

ELIZA: O God!

JIM: Come, lass,
I say!

JUDITH: No woman, no! I spoke the truth.
Haven't I shamed myself enough already—
That you must call me liar! (*To* ELIZA) Speak out now,
If you're not tongue-tied: tell her all you ken—
How I'm a byword among honest women,
And yet, no liar. You'd tongue enough just now
To tell me what I was—a cruel tongue
Cracking about my ears: and have you none
To answer your son's wife, and save the lad
From scandal?

ELIZA: I've not known the lass to lie . . .
And she's the true heart, Phœbe, true as death,
Whatever it may seem.

JIM: That's that: and so . . .

(*While they have been talking,* EZRA *has risen from the settle, unnoticed; and has hobbled to where* PHŒBE *and* JUDITH *confront one another. He suddenly touches* PHŒBE'S *arm.*)

EZRA: Cackling like guinea-fowl when a hawk's in air!
I must have snoozed; yet, I caught the gabble.
There'll be
A clatter all day now, with two women's tongues,
Clack-clack against each other, in the house—
Two pendulums in one clock. Lucky I'm deaf.
But, I remember. Give me back the bairn.
Nay: this is not the wench. I want Jim's bride—
The mother of his daughter. Judith, lass,
Where are you? Come, I want to nurse my grandchild—
Jim's little lass.

ELIZA (*stepping towards* EZRA): Come, hold your foolish tongue.
You don't know what you're saying. Come, sit down.
(*Leads him back to the settle.*)

JIM: If he don't stop his yammer, I'll slit his weasen—
I'll wring his neck for him!

EZRA: What's wrong? What's wrong?
I'm an old man, now; and must do as I'm bid like a bairn—
I, who was master, and did all the bidding.
And you, Jim, I'd have broken your back like a rabbit's,
At one time, if you'd talked to me like that.
But now I'm old and sightless; and any tit
May chivvy a blind kestrel. Ay, I'm old
And weak—so waffly in arms and shanks, that now
I couldn't even hold down a hog to be clipped:
So, boys can threaten me, and go unskelped:
So you can bray; and I must hold my peace:
Yet, mark my words, the hemp's ripe for the rope
That'll throttle you one day, you gallows-bird.

But, something's happening that a blind man's sense
Cannot take hold of; so, I'd best be quiet—
Ay, just sit still all day, and nod and nod,
Until I nod myself into my coffin:
That's all that's left me.

JUDITH (*to* PHŒBE): You'd weigh an old man's gossip
Against my word? O woman, pay no heed
To idle tongues, if you'd keep happiness.

PHŒBE: While the tongue lies, the eyes speak out the truth.

JUDITH: The eyes? Then you'll not take my word for it,
But let a dotard's clatterjaw destroy you?
You ken my worth: yet, if you care for Jim,
You'll trust his oath. If he denies the bairn,
Then, you'll believe? You'd surely never doubt
Your husband's word, and on your wedding-day?
Small wonder you'd be duberous of mine.
But Jim's not my sort; he's an honest lad;
And he'll speak truly. If he denies the bairn . . .

PHŒBE: I've not been used to doubting people's word.
My father's daughter couldn't but be trustful
Of what men said; for he was truth itself.
If only he'd lived, I mightn't . . .

JUDITH: If Jim denies . . .

PHŒBE: If Jim can look me in the eyes, and swear . . .

JUDITH: Come, set her mind at ease. Don't spare me, Jim;
But look her in the eyes, and tell her all;
For she's your wife; and has a right to ken
The bairn's no bairn of yours. Come, lad, speak out;

And don't stand gaping. You ken as well as I
The bairn . . . Speak! Speak! Have you no tongue at all?

(*She pauses; but* JIM *hesitates to speak.*)

Don't think of me. You've naught to fear from me.
Tell all you ken of me right out: no word
Of yours can hurt me now: I'm shameless, now:
I'm in the ditch, and spattered to the neck.
Come, don't mince matters: your tongue's not so modest
It fears to make your cheeks burn—I ken that;
And when the question is a woman's virtue,
It rattles like a reaper round a wheatfield,
And as little cares if it's cutting grain or poppies.
So, it's too late to blush and stammer now,
And let your teeth trip up your tongue. Speak out!

(JIM *still hesitates.*)

Your wife is waiting; if you don't tell her true,
And quick about it, it's your own look-out.
I wouldn't be in your shoes, anyway.
See, how she's badgered me; and all because . . .
Come: be a man: and speak.

JIM: The brat's no brat
Of mine, Phœbe, I swear . . .

(*He stops in confusion, dropping his eyes.* PHŒBE *turns from him, lays one hand on the latch and the other on* JUDITH'S *arm.*)

PHŒBE: Come, lass, it's time
We were getting home.

JUDITH: We?

PHŒBE: Ay, unless you'd stay?
You've the right.

JUDITH: I stay? O God, what have I done!
That I'd never crossed the threshold!
ELIZA: You're not going
To leave him, Phœbe? You cannot: you're his wife;
And cannot quit . . . But, I'm getting old . . .
JIM: Leave me?
Leave me? She's mad! I never heard the like—
And on my wedding-day—stark, staring mad!
But, I'm your husband; and I bid you bide.
PHŒBE: O Jim, if you had only told the truth,
I might, God knows—for I was fond of you,
And trusted . . .
JIM: Now you're talking sense. Leave me—
And married to me in a church, and all!
But, that's all over; and you're not huffed now.
There's naught in me to take a scunner at.
Yet the shying filly may prove a steady mare,
Once a man's astriddle her who'll stand no capers.
You've got to let a woman learn who's master,
Sooner or later: so, it's just as well
To get it over, once and for all. That's that.
And now, let Judith go. Come, Phœbe, lass:
I thought you'd a tender heart. Don't be too hard
On a luckless wench: but let bygones be bygones.
All's well that ends well. And what odds, my lass,
Even if the brat were mine?
PHŒBE: Judith, you're ready?
JIM: Let the lass bide, and sup with us. I'll warrant
She'll not say nay: she's a peckish look, as though
She'd tasted no singing-hinnies this long while back.
Mother, another cup. Draw up your chairs.
We've not a wedding-party every day

At Krindlesyke. I'm ravenous as a squab,
When someone's potted dad and mammy crow.
So sit down, Phœbe, before I clear the board.

PHŒBE: Judith, it's time we were getting home.

JUDITH: Home, lass?
I've got no home: I've long been homeless: I . . .

PHŒBE: That much he told me about you: he spoke the truth
So far, at least: but I have still a home,
My mother will be glad to see me back—
Ay, more than glad: she was loth to let me go;
Though, trusting Jim, as she trusted everyone,
She said but little: and she'll welcome you,
If only for your baby's sake. She's just
A child, with children. Unless you are too proud . . .
Nay! But I see you'll come. We'll live and work,
And tend the bairn, as sisters, we who care.
Come, Judith.

(*She throws the door wide and goes out, without looking back.* JIM *steps forward to stay her, but halts, bewildered, on the threshold, and stands gazing after her.*)

JIM: I'm damned! Nay, lass, I bid you bide:
I'd see you straked, before I'd let you go . . .
Do you hear, I bid . . . The blasted wench, she's gone—
Gone! I've a mind . . . If I don't hang for her . . .
Just let me get my fingers . . . But, I'm betwattled
Like a stoorded tup! And this is my wedding-day!

(*He stands speechless; but at length turns to* JUDITH, *who is gazing after* PHŒBE *with an unrealizing stare.*)

JIM: Well . . . anyway, you'll not desert me. Judith.

Old friends are best: and I—I always liked you.
The other lass was a lamb to woo, but wed,
A termagant: and I'm well shot of her.
I'd have wrung the pullet's neck for her one day,
If she'd—and the devil to pay! So it's good riddance . . .
Yet, she'd a way with her, she had, the filly!
And I'd have relished breaking her in. But you
Were always easy-going, and fond of me—
Ay, fond and faithful. Look, how you stood up
To her, the tawpy tauntril, for my sake!
We'll let bygones be bygones, won't we, Judith?
My chickens have come home to roost, it seems.
And so, this is my baby? Who'd have dreamt . . .
I little looked to harvest my wild oats.

(JUDITH *starts, shrinking from* JIM: *and then, clutching her baby to her bosom, she goes quickly out of the door.*)

JUDITH: I'm coming, Phœbe, coming home with you!

(JIM *stands on the doorstone, staring after her, dumbfounded, till she is out of sight; then he turns, and clashes the door to.*)

ELIZA: Ay, but it's time to bar the stable door.

JIM: I've done with women: they're a faithless lot.

EZRA: I can't make head or tail of all the wrangling—

Such a gillaber and gilravishing,
As I never heard in all my born days, never.
Weddings were merrymakings in my time:

The reckoning seldom came till the morrow's morn.
But, Jim, my boy, though you're a baa-waa body,
And gan about like a goose with a nicked head,
You've, aiblains, found out now that petticoats
Are kittle-cattle, the whole rabblement.
The reesty nags will neither heck nor gee:
And they're all clingclang like the Yetholm tinkers
Ay: though you're just a splurging jackalally,
You've spoken truth for once, Jim: womenfolk,
Wenches and wives, are all just weathercocks.
I've ever found them faithless, first and last.
But, where's your daughter, Jim? I want to hold
The bairn.

JIM: They've taken even her from me.

(ELIZA, *who has been filling the teapot, takes* EZRA *by the hand, and leads him to his seat at the table.*)

ELIZA: Come, husband: sup your tea, before it's cold:
And you, too, son. Ay, we're a faithless lot.

BOOK II

BELL HAGGARD

PART I

Midsummer morning. EZRA BARRASFORD *sits crouched over the fire.* ELIZA BARRASFORD, *looking old and worn, and as if dazed by a shock, comes from the ben, or inner room, with a piece of paper in her hand. As she sinks to a chair to recover her breath, the paper flutters to the floor, where she lets it lie, and sits staring before her.*

ELIZA: So that's the last.

EZRA: The last? The last of what?

ELIZA: The last of your sons to leave you. Jim's gone now.

EZRA: Gone where, the tyke? After his wife, I'll warrant.
'Twill take him all his time to catch her up:
She's three months' start of him. The gonneril,
To be forsaken on his wedding-day:
And the ninneyhammer let her go—he let her!
Do you reckon I'd let a woman I'd fetched home
Go gallivanting off at her own sweet will?
No wench I'd ringed, and had a mind to hold,
Should quit the steading till she was carried, feet-first

And shoulder-high, packed snug in a varnished box.
The noodle couldn't stand up to a woman's tongue:
And so, lightheels picked up her skirts, and flitted,
Before he'd even bedded her—skelped off
Like a ewe turned lowpy-dyke; and left the nowt,
The laughing-stock of the countryside. He should
Have used his fist to teach her manners. She seemed
To have the fondy flummoxed, till his wits
Were fozy as a frosted swede. Do you reckon
I'd let a lass . . .

ELIZA: And yet, six lads have left you,
Without a by-your-leave.

EZRA: Six lads?

ELIZA: Your sons.

EZRA: Ay . . . but they'd not the spunk to scoot till I
Was blind and crippled. The scurvy rats skidaddled
As the old barn-roof fell in. While I'd my sight,
They'd scarce the nerve to look me in the eye,
The blinking, slinking squealers!

ELIZA: Ay, we're old.
The heat this morning seems to suffocate me,
My head's a skep of buzzing bees; and I pant
Like an old ewe under a dyke, when the sun gives scarce
An inch of shade. You harp on sight: but eyes
Aren't everything: my sight's a girl's: and yet
I'm old and broken: you've broken me, among you.
I'd count the pens of a hanging hawk: yet my eyes
Have saved me little: they've never seen to the bottom
Of the blackness of men's hearts. The very sons

Of my body, I reckoned to ken through and through,
As every mother thinks she knows her sons,
Have been pitch night to me. We never learn.
I thought I'd got by heart each turn and twist
Of all Jim's stupid cunning : but even he's
Outwitted me. Six sons, and not one left ;
All gone in bitterness—firstborn to reckling :
Peter, twelve-year since, that black Christmas Eve :
And now Jim ends . . .

EZRA : You mean Jim's gone for good ?

ELIZA : For good and all : he's taken Peter's road.

EZRA : And who's to tend the ewes? He couldn't go—
No herd could leave his sheep to an old wife's care :
For this old carcase, once counted the best herd's
In the countryside, is a useless bag of bones now.
Jim couldn't leave . . .

ELIZA : For all I ken or care,
He's taken them with him too.

EZRA : You're havering !
Your sons aren't common thieves, I trust. And Jim
Would scarce have pluck to sneak a swede from the mulls
Of a hobbled ewe, much less make off with a flock—
Though his forbears lifted a wheen Scots' beasts in their time—
And Steel would have him by the heels before
He'd travelled a donkey's gallop, though he skelped along
Like Willie Pigg's dick-ass. But how do you ken
The gawky's gone for good ? He couldn't leave . . .

ELIZA: I found a paper in the empty chest,
Scrawled with a bit of writing in his hand:
"Tell dad I've gone to look for his lost wits:
And he'll not see me till he gets new eyes
To seek me himself."
EZRA: Eyes or no eyes, I'll break
The foumart's back, in this world or the next:
He'll not escape. He thinks he's the laugh of me;
But I've never let another man laugh last.
Though he should take the short cut to the gallows,
I'll have him, bibbering on his bended knees
Before me yet, even if I have to wait
Till I find him, brizzling on the coals of hell.
But, what do you say—the empty chest—what chest?
ELIZA: The kist beneath the bed.
EZRA: But, that's not empty!
How could you open it, when I'd the key
Strung safely on a bootlace next my skin?
ELIZA: The key—you should have chained the kist, itself,
As a locket round your neck, if you'd have kept
Your precious hoard from your own flesh and blood.
EZRA: To think a man begets the thieves to rob him!
But, how . . .
ELIZA: I had no call to open it.
I caught my foot against the splintered lid,
When I went to make the bed.
EZRA: The splintered lid!
And the kist—the kist! You say 'twas empty?

ELIZA: Not quite:
The paper was in.
EZRA: But the money, you dam of thieves—
Where was the money?
ELIZA: It wasn't in the box—
Not a brass farthing.
EZRA: The money gone—all gone?
Why didn't you tell me about it right away?
ELIZA: I wasn't minding money: I'd lost a son.
EZRA: A son—a thief! I'll have the law of him:
I'll sprag his wheel: for all his pretty pace,
He'll come a cropper yet, the scrunty wastrel.
This comes of marrying into a coper's family:
I might have kenned: thieving runs in their blood.
ELIZA: I've seen the day that lie'd have roused . . .
But now,
It's not worth while . . . worth while. I've never felt
Such heat: it smothers me: it's like a nightmare,
When you wake with your head in the blankets, all asweat:
Only, I cannot wake . . . It snowed the night
That Peter went . . .
EZRA: Blabbering of heat and snow:
And all that money gone—my hard-earned savings!
We're beggared, woman—beggared by your son:
And then, to sit and yammer like a yieldewe:
Come, stir your stumps; and clap your bonnet on:
Up and away!
ELIZA: And where should I away to?
EZRA: I'll have the law of him: I'll have him gaoled,
And you must fetch the peeler.

ELIZA: Policemen throng
Round Krindlesyke, as bees about a thistle!
And I'm to set the peelers on my son?
If he'd gone with Peter, they'd have tracked his hob-
nails . . .
It snowed that night . . . The snowflakes buzz like bees
About the prickling thistles in my head—
Big bumblebees . . . I never felt such heat.
EZRA: And I must sit, tied to a chair, and hearken
To an old wife, havering of bumblebees,
While my hard-earned sovereigns lie snug and warm
In the breeches' pocket of a rascal thief—
Fifty gold sovereigns!
ELIZA: Fifty golden bees—
Golden Italian queens . . . My father spent
A sight of money on Italian queens:
For he'd a way with bees. He'd handle them
With naked hands. They swarmed on his beard, and
hung,
Buzzing like fury: but he never blinked—
Just wagged his head, swaying them, till they dropped,
All of a bunch, into an upturned skep. . . .
My head's a hive of buzzing bees—bees buzzing
In the hot, crowded darkness, dripping honey . . .
EZRA: You're wandering, woman—maffling like a
madpash.
Jim's stolen your senses, when he took my gold.
ELIZA: Don't talk of money now: I want to think.
Six sons, I had. My sons, you say. You're right:
For menfolk have no children: only women
Carry them: only women are brought to bed:

And only women labour: and, when they go,
Only the mothers lose them: and all for nothing,
The coil and cumber! If I could have left one son,
Wedded, and settled down at Krindlesyke,
To do his parents credit, and carry on . . .
First Peter came: it snowed the night he came—
A feeding-storm of fisselling dry snow.
I lay and watched flakes fleetering out of the dark
In the candleshine against the wet black glass,
Like moths about a lanthorn . . . I lay and watched,
Till the pains were on me . . . And they buzzed like bees,
The snowflakes in my head—hot, stinging bees . . .
It snowed again, the night he went. . . . In the smother
I lost him, in a drift down Bloodysyke . . .
I couldn't follow further: the snow closed in—
Dry flakes that stung my face like swarming bees,
And blinded me . . . and buzzing, till my head
Was all ahum; and I was fair betwattled . . .
I've not set eyes . . .

EZRA: Gather your wits together.
There's no one else; and you must go to Rawridge—
No daundering on the road; and tell John Steel
Jim's gone: and so, there's none to look to the sheep.
He must send someone . . . Though my money melt
In the hot pocket of a vagabond,
They must be minded: sheep can't tend themselves.

ELIZA: I'll go. 'Twas cruel to leave them in this heat,
With none to water them. This heat's a judgment.
They were my sons: I bore and suckled them.

This heat's a judgment on me, pressing down
On my brain like a redhot iron . . .

(*She rises with difficulty, and goes, bareheaded, into the sunshine. In a few moments she staggers back, and stumbles, with unseeing eyes, towards the inner room. She pauses a second at the door, and turns, as if to speak to* EZRA; *but goes in, without a word. Presently a soft thud is heard within: then a low moan.*)

EZRA: Who's there? Not you,
Eliza? You can't be back already, woman?
Why don't you speak? You yammered enough, just now—
Such havers! Haven't you gone? What's keeping you?
I told you to step out. What's wrong? What's wrong?
You're wambling like a wallydraigling waywand.
The old ewe's got the staggers. Boodyankers!
If I wasn't so crocked and groggy, I'd make a fend
To go myself—ay, blind bat as I am.
Come, pull yourself together; and step lively.
What's that? What's that? I can't hear anything now.
Where are you, woman? Speak! There's no one here—
Though I'd have sworn I heard the old wife waigling,
As if she carried a hoggerel on her shoulders.
I heard a foot: yet, she couldn't come so soon.
I'm going watty. My mind's so set on dogging
The heels of that damned thief, hot-foot for the gallows,
I hear his footsteps echoing in my head.
He'd hirple it barefoot on the coals of hell,

With a red-hot prong at his hurdies to prog him on,
If I'd my way with him : de'il scart the hanniel !

(*He sits, brooding : and some time has passed, when the head of a tramp, shaggy and unkempt, is thrust in at the door ; and is followed by the body of* PETER BARRASFORD, *who steps cautiously in, and stealing up to the old man's chair, stands looking down upon him with a grin.*)

EZRA (*stirring uneasily*) : A step, for sure ! You're back ? Though how you've travelled
So quickly, Eliza, I can't think. And when's
John Steel to turn us out, to follow Jim
And the other vagabonds ? And who's he sending ?
He's not a man to spare . . . But, sheep are sheep :
Someone must tend them, though all else go smash.
I've given my life to sheep, spent myself for them :
And now, I'm not the value of a dead sheep
To any farmer—a rackle of bones for the midden !
A bitter day, 'twill be, when I turn my back
On Krindlesyke. I little reckoned to go,
A blind old cripple, hobbling on two sticks.
Pride has a fall, they say : and I was proud—
Proud as a thistle ; and a donkey's cropt
The thistle's prickly pride. Why don't you speak ?
I'm not mistaken this time : I heard you come :
I feel you standing over me.

(*He pokes round with his stick, catching* PETER *on the shin with it.*)

PETER (*wresting the stick from* EZRA's *grasp*) : Easy on !
Peter's no lad to take a leathering, now.

Your time's come round for breeches down, old boy:
But don't be scared; for I'm no walloper—
Too like hard work! My son's a clean white skin:
He's never skirled, as you made me. By gox,
You gave me gip: my back still bears the stripes
Of the loundering I got the night I left.
But I bear no malice, you old bag-of-bones:
And where's the satisfaction in committing
Assault and battery on a blasted scarecrow?
'Twas basting hot young flesh that you enjoyed:
I still can hear you smack your lips with relish,
To see the blue weals rising, as you laid on,
Until the tawse was bloody. Not juice enough
In your geyzened carcase to raise one weal: and I never
Could bear the sound of cracking bones: and you're
All nobs and knuckles, like the parson's pig.
To think I feared you once, old spindleshanks!
But I'm not here for paying compliments:
I've other pressing business on that brings me
To the God-forsaken gaol where I was born.
If I make sense of your doting, mother's out:
And that's as well: it makes things easier.
She'd flufter me: and I like to take things easy,
Though I'm no sneak: I come in, bold as brass,
By the front, when there's no back door. I'll do the trick
While she's gone: and borrow a trifle on account.
I trust that cuddy hasn't cropt your cashbox,
Before your eldest son has got his portion.

(*He starts to go towards the inner room, but stops half-way as he hears a step on the threshold.*)

PETER: The devil!

BELL HAGGARD, *a tall young tinker-woman, with an orange-coloured kerchief about her head, appears in the doorway with her young son,* MICHAEL.

PETER: You, Bell? Lass, but you startled me.
EZRA (*muttering to himself*): This must be death: the crows are gathering in.
I don't feel like cold carrion, but corbies will gather,
And flesh their bloody beaks on an old ram's carcase,
Before the life's quite out.
PETER (*to* BELL): I feared 'twas mother.
Lucky, she's out; it's easier to do—
Well, you ken what, when she's . . . But didn't I bid
You keep well out of sight, you and the lad?
BELL: You did. What then?
PETER: I thought 'twas better
the bairn . . .
BELL: You think too much for a man with a small head:
You'll split the scalp, some day. I've not been used
To doing any man's bidding, as you should ken:
And I'd a mind to see the marble halls
You dreamt you dwelt in.
PETER: Hearken, how she gammons!
BELL: She—the cat's mother? You've no manners, Peter:
You haven't introduced us.
PETER: Only hark!
Well, dad, she's Bell—Bell Haggard, tinker-born—
She'll tell you she's blood-royal, likely as not—

And this lad happens to be hers and mine,
Somehow, though we're not married.
BELL: What a fashion
To introduce a boy to his grandfather—
And such a dear, respectable old sheep's head!
(*to* MICHAEL)
Look well on granddad, son, and see what comes
Of minding sheep.
MICHAEL: I mean to be a shepherd.
BELL: Well, you've a knack of getting your own way:
But, tripe and trotters, you can look on him,
And still say that? Ay, you're his grandson, surely—
All Barrasford, with not a dash of Haggard,
No drop of the wild colt's blood. Ewe's milk you'd bleed
If your nose were tapped. Who'd ever guess my dugs
Had suckled you? Even your dad's no more
Than three-parts mutton, with a strain of reynard—
A fox's heart, for all his weak sheep's head.
Lad, look well round on your ancestral halls:
You'll likely not clap eyes on them again.
I'm eager to be off: we don't seem welcome.
Your venerable grandsire is asleep,
Or else he's a deaf mute; though, likely enough,
That's how folk look, awake, at Krindlesyke.
I'd fancied we were bound for the Happy Return:
But we've landed at the Undertaker's Arms—
And after closing time, and all. You've done
That little business, Peter—though it's not bulged
Your pockets overmuch, that I can see?
PETER: Just setting about it, when you interrupted . . .

BELL: Step lively, then. I find this welcome too warm
On such a sultry day: I'm choked for air.
These whitewashed walls, they're too like—well, you ken
Where you'll find yourself, if you get nobbled . . .
PETER: It seems
There's no one here to nab us; Jim's gone off:
But I'd as lief be through with it, and away,
Before my mother's back.
BELL: You're safe enough:
There's none but sheep in sight for three miles round:
And they're all huddled up against the dykes,
With lollering tongues too baked to bleat "Stop thief!"
Look slippy! I'm half-scumfished by these walls—
A weak flame, easily snuffed out: the stink
Of whitewash makes me queasy—sets me listening
To catch the click of the cell-door behind me:
I feel cold bracelets round my wrists, already.
Is thon the strong-room?
PETER: Ay.
BELL: Then sharp's the word:
It's time that we were stepping, Deadwood Dick.

(*As* PETER *goes into the other room,* EZRA *tries to rise from his chair.*)

EZRA: Help! Murder! Thieves!
BELL (*thrusting him easily back with one hand*): The oracle has spoken.
And so, old image, you've found your tongue at last:
Small wonder you mislaid it, in such a mug.

Help, say you? But, you needn't bleat so loud:
There's none within three miles to listen to you,
But me and Peter and Michael; and we're not deaf:
So don't go straining your voice, old nightingale,
Or splitting your wheezy bellows. And "thieves," no less!
Tastes differ: but it isn't just the word
I'd choose for welcoming my son and heir,
When he comes home; and brings with him his—well,
His son, and his son's mother, shall we say,
So's not to scandalize your innocence?
And, come to think, it's none too nice a word
For grandson's ears: and me, his tender mammy,
Doing all I can to keep the lamb's heart pure.
And as for "murder"—how could there be murder?
Murder's full-blooded—no mean word like "thieves":
And who could murder a bundle of dried peas-sticks?
Flung on the fire, happen they'd crackle and blaze:
But I'm hot enough, to-day, without you frizzling.
Still, "thieves" sticks in my gullet, old heel-of-the-loaf.
Yet I'm not particular, myself, at times:
And I've always gathered from your dutiful son
Manners were taken for granted at Krindlesyke,
And never missed: so I'll overlook the word.
You've not been used to talking with a lady,
Old scrag-end: still, I'm truly honoured, sir,
In making your acquaintance: for I've heard
Some pretty things about you from your son.

(EZRA, *who has shrunk back, gasping, into his chair, suddenly starts chuckling to himself.*)

BELL: You're merry, sir! Will you not share the jest?
Aren't you the sparky blade, the daffing callant,
Naffing and nickering like a three-year-old?
Come, none-so-pretty, cough the old wheeze up,
Before it chokes you. Let me clap your back.
You're, surely, never laughing at a lady?
(*Seizing him by the collar, and shaking him.*)
You deafy nut—you gibbet—you rusty corncrake!
Tell me what's kittling you, old skeleton,
Or I'll joggle your bones till they rattle like castanets.
(*Suddenly releasing him.*)
Come, Peter: let's away from this mouldy gaol,
Before old heeltaps takes a fit. Your son
Will be a full-grown shepherd before we leave—
And his old mother, trapped between four walls—
If you don't put a jerk in it.
(PETER *comes slowly from the inner room, empty-handed; and stands, dazed, in the doorway.*)
BELL: Well, fumble-fingers?
What's kept you this half-year? I could have burgled
The Bank of England in the time. What's up?
Have you gone gite, now?
EZRA (*still chuckling*): Thieves cheated by a thief!
BELL: But, where's the box?
PETER: I didn't see the box.
BELL: You didn't see it?
PETER: No; I didn't see it:
The valance hangs too low.
BELL: And you're too proud—
Too proud a prig to stoop? Did you expect

The box to bounce itself into your arms,
The moment it heard your step?

PETER: I dared not stoop:
For there was someone lying on the bed,
Asleep, I think.

BELL: You think?

PETER: I only saw
A hunched-up shoulder, poking through the curtain.

BELL: A woman?

PETER: Ay, my mother, or her fetch.
I couldn't take my eyes from that hunched shoulder—
It looked so queer—till you called my name.

BELL: You said
Your mother was out. But, we've no time to potter.
To think I've borne a son to a calf that's fleyed
Of a sleeping woman's back—his minney's, and all!
Collops and chitterlings, if she's asleep,
The job's the easier done. There's not a woman,
Or a woman's fetch, would scare me from good gold.
I'll get the box.

(*She steals softly into the other room, and is gone for some time. The others await her expectantly in silence. Presently she comes out, bareheaded and empty-handed. Without a word, she goes to the window, and pulls down the blind; then closes the outer door:* PETER *and* MICHAEL *watching her in amazement.*)

EZRA: So Jim, the fox, has cheated Peter, the fox—
And vixen and cub, to boot! But, he made off
Only this morning: and the scent's still fresh.
You'll ken the road he'd take, the fox's track—

A thief to catch a thief! He's lifted all:
But, if you cop him, I'll give you half, although
'Twill scarcely leave enough to bury us
With decency, when we have starved to death,
Your mother and I. Run, lad: there's fifty-sovereign!
And mind you clout and clapperclaw the cull:
Spanghew his jacket, when you've riped his pockets—
The scurvy scrunt!

BELL: Silence, old misery:
There's a dead woman lying in the house—
And you can prate of money!

PETER: Dead!

EZRA: Eliza!

BELL: I found the body, huddled on the bed,
Already cold and stiffening.

EZRA: I thought I heard . . .
Yet, she set out for Rawridge, to fetch a man . . .
I felt her passing, in my very bones.
I knew her foot: you cannot hear a step
For forty-year, and mistake it, though the spring's
Gone out of it, and it's turned to a shuffle, it's still
The same footfall. Why didn't she answer me?
She chattered enough, before she went—such havers!
Words tumbling from her lips in a witless jumble.
Contrary, to the last, she wouldn't answer:
But crept away, like a wounded pheasant, to die
Alone. She's gone before me, after all—
And she, so hale; while I was crutched and crippled.
I haven't looked on her face for eleven-year:
But she was bonnie, when I saw her first,
That morning at the fair—so fresh and pink.

BELL: She must have died alone. It's an ill thing
To die alone, folk say; but I don't know.
She'd hardly die more lonely than she lived:
For every woman's lonely in her heart.
I never looked on a lonelier face.

PETER: Come, Bell:
We'd best be making tracks: there's nothing here:
So let's be going.

BELL: Going, Peter, where?

PETER: There's nothing to bide here for: we're too late.
Jim's stolen a march on us: there's no loot left.

BELL: And you would leave a woman, lying dead;
And an old blind cripple who cannot do a hand's-turn,
With no one to look after them—and they,
Your father and mother?

PETER: Little enough I owe them:
What can we do for them, anyway? We can't
Bring back the dead to life: and, sooner or later,
Someone will come from Rawridge to see to the sheep:
And dad won't hurt, meanwhile: he's gey and tough.

BELL: And you would leave your mother, lying dead,
With none but strangers' hands to lay her out—
No soul of her kin to tend her at the last?

(*She goes to the dresser and looks in the drawers, taking out an apron and tying it round her waist.*)

EZRA: I never guessed she'd go, and leave me alone.
How did she think I could get along without her?
She kenned I could do nothing for myself:
And yet she's left me alone, to starve to death—

Just sit in my chair, and starve. It wasn't like her.
And the breath's scarce out of her body, before the place
Is overrun with a plague of thieving rats.
They'll eat me out of house and home: my God,
I've come to this—an old blind crippled dobby,
Forsaken of wife and bairns; and left to die—
To be nibbled to death by rats: de'il scart the vermin!

BELL: Time's drawn your teeth, but hasn't dulled your tongue's edge.

PETER: Come, woman: what the devil are you up to?
What's this new game?

BELL: Peter, I'm biding here.

PETER: You're biding here?

BELL: And you are staying, too.

PETER: By crikey, no! You'll not catch me: I cannot—
With thon in the other room. I never could bear . . .

BELL: You'll stop, till Michael's old enough to manage
The sheep without your aid: then you may spurt
To overtake Jim on the road to the gallows;
And race, the pair of you, neck and neck, for hell:
But not till I'm done with you.

PETER: Nay, I'll be jiggered . . .

BELL: Truth slips out.

PETER: I've a mind . . .

BELL: She's gone to earth.

PETER: Just hold your gob, you . . .

BELL: Does the daft beast fancy
That just because he's in his own calfyard
He can turn his horns on me? Michael, my son,

You've got your way : and you're to be a herd.
You never took to horseflesh like a Haggard :
Yet your mother must do her best for you. A mattress
Under a roof ; and sheep to keep you busy—
That's what you're fashioned for—not bracken-beds
In fellside ditches underneath the stars ;
And sharing potluck by the roadside fire.
Well, every man must follow his own bent,
Even though some woman's wried to let him do it :
So, I must bide within this whitewashed gaol,
For ever scrubbing flagstones, and washing dishes,
And darning hose, and making meals for men,
Half-suffocated by the stink of sheep,
Till you find a lass to your mind ; and set me free
To take the road again—if I'm not too doddery
For gallivanting ; as most folk are by the time
They've done their duty by others. Who'd have dreamt
I'd make the model mother, after all ?
It seems as though a woman can't escape,
Once she has any truck with men. But, carties !
Something's gone topsy-turvy with creation,
When the cuckoo's turned domestic, and starts to rear
The young housesparrow. Granddad, Peter's home
To mind the sheep : and you'll not be turned out,
If you behave yourself : and when you're lifted,
There'll be a grandson still at Krindlesyke :
For Michael is a Barrasford, blood and bone :
And till the day he fetches home a bride,
I'm to be mistress here. But hark, old bones,
You've got to mend your manners : for I'm used
To having my own way.

PETER: By gox, she is!

BELL: And there's not room for two such in one house.
Where I am mistress, there can be no master:
So, don't try on your pretty tricks with me.
I've always taken the whiphand with men.

PETER: You'll smart yet, dad.

BELL: You go about your business,
Before your feet get frozen to the flagstones:
Winter's but six months off, you ken. It's time
You were watering those sheep, before their tongues
Are baked as black as your heart. You'd better take
The lad along with you: he cannot learn
The job too soon; so I'll get shot of the sight
Of your mug, and have one lout the less to do for.
Come, frisk your feet, the pair of you; and go:
I've that to do which I must do alone.

(*As soon as* PETER *and* MICHAEL *are gone*, BELL *fills a basin with water from a bucket, and carries it into the other room, shutting the door behind her.*)

EZRA: To think she should go first, when I have had
One foot in the grave for hard on eleven-year!
I little looked to taste her funeral ham.

PART II

An October afternoon, fifteen years later. There is no one in the room: and the door stands open, showing a wide expanse of fell, golden in the low sunshine. A figure is seen approaching along the cart-track: and JUDITH ELLERSHAW, *neatly dressed in black, appears at the door; and stands, undecided, on the threshold. She knocks several times, but no one answers: so she steps in, and seats herself on a chair near the door. Presently a sound of singing is heard without: and* BELL HAGGARD *is seen, coming over the bent, an orange-coloured kerchief about her head, her skirt kilted to the knee, and her arms full of withered bracken. She enters, humming: but stops, with a start, on seeing* JUDITH; *drops the bracken; whips off her kerchief; and lets down her skirt; and so appears as an ordinary cottage-wife.*

JUDITH: You're Mistress Barrasford?

BELL: Ay; so they call me.

JUDITH: I knocked; but no one answered; so, I've taken
The liberty of stepping in to rest.
I'm Judith Ellershaw.

BELL: I've heard the name;
But can't just mind . . . Ay! You're the hard-mouthed wench
That took the bit in her teeth, and bolted: although
You scarcely look it, either. Old Ezra used
To mumble your name, when he was raiming on
About the sovereigns Jim made off with: he missed
The money more than the son—small blame to him:
Though why grudge travelling-expenses to good-riddance?
And still, 'twas shabby to pinch the lot: a case
Of pot and kettle, but I'd have scorned to bag
The lot, and leave the old folk penniless.
'Twas hundreds Peter blabbed of—said our share
Wouldn't be missed—or I'd have never set foot
In Krindlesyke; to think I walked into this trap
For fifty-pound, that wasn't even here!
I might have kenned—Peter never told the truth,
Except by accident. I did . . . and yet,
I came. I had to come: the old witch drew me.
But, Jim was greedy . . .

JUDITH: Doesn't Jim live here, now?

BELL: You're not sent back by the penitent, then, to pay
The interest on the loan he took that morning
In an absent-minded fit—and pretty tales
Are tarradiddles? Jim's not mucked that step
In my time: Ezra thought he'd followed you.

JUDITH: Me?

BELL: You're Jim's wife—though you've not taken his name—

Stuck to your own, and rightly: I'd not swap mine
For any man's: but, you're the bride the bridegroom
Lost before bedtime?

JUDITH: No, 'twas Phœbe Martin:
And dead, this fifteen-year: she didn't last
A twelvemonth after—it proved too much for her,
The shock; for all her heart was set on Jim.

BELL: Poor fool: though I've no cause to call her so;
For women are mostly fools, where men come in.
You're not the vanished bride? Then who've I blabbed
The family-secrets to, unsnecking the cupboard,
And setting the skeleton rattling his bones? I took you
For one of us, who'd ken our pretty ways;
And reckoned naught I could tell of Jim to Jim's wife
Could startle her, though she'd no notion of it.

JUDITH: I took you for Jim's wife.

BELL: Me! I'm a fool—
But never fool enough to wear a ring
For any man.

JUDITH: Yet, Mistress Barrasford?

BELL: They call me that: but I'm Bell Haggard still;
And will be to the day I die, and after:
Though, happen, there'll be marriage and giving in marriage
In hell; for old Nick's ever been matchmaker.
In that particular, heaven would suit me better:
But I've travelled the wrong road too far to turn now.

JUDITH: Then you're not the mother of Michael Barrasford?

BELL: And who's the brass to say he's not my son?

I'm no man's wife: but what's to hinder me
From being a mother?
JUDITH: Then Jim is his father?
BELL: And what's it got to do with you, the man
I chose for my son's father? Chose—God help us!
That's how we women gammon ourselves. Deuce kens
The almighty lot choice has to do with it!
JUDITH: It wasn't Jim, then?
BELL: Crikey! You're not blate
Of asking questions: I've not been so riddled
Since that old egg-with-whiskers committed me.
Why harp on Jim? I've not clapped eyes on Jim,
Your worship; though I fear I must plead guilty
To some acquaintance with the family,
As you might put it; seeing that Jim's brother
Is my son's father; though how it came to happen,
The devil only kenned; and he's forgotten.
JUDITH: Thank God, it wasn't Jim.
BELL: And so say I:
Though, kenning only Peter, I'm inclined
To fancy Jim may be the better man.
What licks me is, what it's to do with you?
And why I answer your delicate questions, woman?
Even old hard-boiled drew the line somewhere.
JUDITH: I'm the mother of Jim's daughter.
BELL: You're the wench
The bride found here—and the mother of a daughter;
And live . . .
JUDITH: At Bellingham.
BELL: Where Michael finds
So often he's pressing business, must be seen to—

Something to do with sheep. I see . . . To think
I didn't guess! Why is it, any man
Can put the blinkers on us? But, was I blind,
Or only wanting not to see—afraid
Of what I've been itching after all these years?
Can a hawk be caged so long, it's scared to watch
The cage door opening? More to it than that:
After all, there's something of the mother in me.
Ay: you've found Michael's minney! As for his dad,
It's eight-year since he quitted Krindlesyke,
The second time, for good.

JUDITH: He left you?

BELL: Hooked it:
But, shed no tears for me: he only left me,
As a sobering lout will quit the bramble-bush
He's tumbled in, blind-drunk—or was it an anthill
He'd pillowed his fuddled head on? Anyway,
He went, sore-skinned; and gay to go; escaped
From Krindlesyke—he always had the luck—
Before the bitter winter that finished Ezra:
But, I'd to stay on, listening all day long
To that old dotard, counting the fifty sovereigns
Your fancy man made off with, when he cleaned out
The coffers of Krindlesyke, the very day
Ananias and I came for our share, too late:
And so, got stuck at Back-o'-Beyont, like wasps
In a treacle-trap—the gold all gone: naught left
But the chink of coins in an old man's noddle, that age
Had emptied of wits. He'd count them, over and over—
Just stopping to curse Jim, when he called to mind

The box was empty : and, often, in the night,
I'd hear him counting, counting in the dark,
Till the night he stopped at forty-nine, stopped dead,
With a rattle—not a breath to whisper fifty.
A crookt corpse, yellow as his lost gold, I found him,
When I fetched my candle.

JUDITH : Dead ?

BELL : Ay, guttered out—
A dip burned to the socket. May chance puff out
My flame, while it still burns steady, and not sowse it
In a sweel of melted tallow.

JUDITH : Ay, but it's sad
When the wits go first.

BELL : And he, so wried and geyzened,
The undertakers couldn't strake him rightly.
Even when they'd nailed him down, and we were watching
By candle-light, the night before the funeral,
Nid-nodding, Michael and I, just as the clock
Struck twelve, there was a crack that brought us to,
Bolt-upright, as the coffin lid flew off :
And old granddaddy sat up in his shroud.

JUDITH : God save us, woman ! Whatever did . . .

BELL : I fancied
He'd popped up to say fifty : but he dropped back
With knees to chin. They'd got to screw him down :
And they'd sore work to get him underground—
Snow overnight had reached the window-sill :
And when, at length, the cart got on the road,
The coffin was jolted twice into the drifts,

Before they'd travelled the twelve-mile to the churchyard :
And the hole they'd howked for him, chockful of slush :
And the coffin slipt with a splash into the sluther.
Ay—we see life at Krindlesyke, God help us !
JUDITH : A fearsome end.
BELL : Little to choose, 'twixt ends.
So, Michael's granddad, and your girl's, went home
To his forefathers, and theirs—both Barrasfords :
Though I'd guess your bairn's a gentler strain : yet mine's
No streak of me. All Barrasford, I judged him :
But, though he's Ezra's stubbornness, he's naught
Of foxy Peter : and grows more like Eliza,
I'd fancy : though I never kenned her, living :
I only saw her, dead.
JUDITH : Eliza, too ?
BELL : I was the first to look on her dead face,
The morn I came : if she'd but lived a day—
Just one day longer, she'd have let me go.
No living woman could have held me here :
But she was dead ; and so, I had to stay—
A fly, caught in the web of a dead spider.
It must be her he favours : and he's got
A dogged patience well-nigh crazes me :
A husband, born, as I was never born
For wife. But, happen, you ken him, well as I,
Leastways, his company-side, since he does business
At Bellingham ? A happy ending, eh !

For our mischances, they should make a match:
Though naught that ever happens is an ending;
A wedding, least of all.
JUDITH: I've never seen him.
Ruth keeps her counsel. I'd not even heard
His name, till late last night; and then by chance:
But, I've not slept a wink since, you may guess.
When I heard "Barrasford of Krindlesyke,"
My heart went cold within me, thinking of Jim,
And what he'd been to me. I'd had no news
Of all that's happened since I left the day
Jim wedded; and . . .
BELL: The nowt felt like a poacher,
When keeper's sneaked his bunny, and broken his snare?
JUDITH: I fancied he, perhaps . . .
BELL: Ay, likely enough.
Jim's wasted a sight of matches, since that day
He burnt his fingers so badly: but he's not kindled
A hearthfire yet at Krindlesyke. Anyway,
For Michael to be his son, I'd need to be
Even an older flame of his than you:
For Michael's twenty-one.
JUDITH: As old as that?
But I could never rest, till I'd made sure.
Knowing myself, I did not question Ruth . . .
BELL: What's worth the kenning's seldom learned by speiring.
JUDITH: Though, knowing myself, I dreaded what might chance,
What might already . . .

BELL: You'd no cause to worrit:
Michael's not that sort: he's respectable—
Too staid and sober for his tinker-mother:
He'll waste no matches, lighting wayside fires.
JUDITH: Like me, Ruth's easy kindled; hard to quench—
A flying spark, and the heather's afire in a gale;
And the fell's burned to the rock—naught but black ash,
When the downpour comes, too late.
BELL: Ay—but the flare,
And crackle, and tossing flames, and golden smoke;
And the sting of the reek in the nostrils!
JUDITH: Ruth'll love
Once and for all: like me, she's born for marriage:
Though, in my eager trustfulness, I missed it.
You'll scorn me, as I often scorn myself:
But, kenning the worst, in my heart of hearts, I hanker . . .
Jim meant so much to me once: I can't forget,
Or keep from dwelling on the might-have-been.
Snow on the felltop, now: but underground
Fire smoulders still: and still might burst to flame.
Deceived and broken . . .
BELL: What's this jackadandy,
That you and Phœbe, both—and kenning him!
JUDITH: What's kenning got to do with love? It makes
No difference, once you've given . . .
BELL: If I've a heart,
And it's broken, it's a broken stone, sunk deep

In bottomless mosshags, where no heat can touch it,
Till the whole world grills, at last, on hell's gridiron.
JUDITH: Nothing you ken of broken hearts, or hell,
To talk so lightly. I have come through hell:
But you have never loved. What's given in love,
Is given. It's something to have loved, at least:
And I have Ruth.
BELL: Ay, the green bracken-shoots,
Soon push through the black litter of charred heath:
And you have Ruth.
JUDITH: Or, had her, till last night:
I've lost her, now, it seems.
BELL: You let life hurt you:
You shy at shadows; and shrink from the crack of the whip,
Before the lash stings: and life loves no sport
Like yarking a shivering hide: you ask for it.
JUDITH: I've been through much.
BELL: And so, you should ken better
Than to hang yourself, before the judge gives sentence:
His honour can put the black cap on for himself,
Without your aid. You'll die a thousand deaths,
Before your end comes, peacefully in bed.
Why should you go half-way to meet your funeral?
JUDITH: Though there's a joy in giving recklessly,
In flinging all your faggots on the blaze,
In losing all for love—a crazy joy
Long years of suffering cannot quench, I'd have

Ruth spared that madness: and kenning she's just
myself
Born over, how could I sleep with the dread upon me?
She'd throw herself away; would burn to waste,
Suffering as I have . . .

BELL: Anyway, you burned:
And who's to say what burns to waste, even when
The kindled peatstack fires the steading? Far better
To perish in a flare, than smoulder away
Your life in smother: and what are faggots for,
If not for firing? But, you've suffered, woman,
More than need be, because you were ashamed.
The lurcher that slinks with drooping tail and lugs
Just asks for pelting. It's shame makes life bad
travelling—
The stone in the shoe that lames you. Other folk
Might be ashamed to do the things I've done:
That's their look-out; they've got no call to do them:
I've never done what I would blush to own to:
I've got my self-respect. For all my talk,
I'm proud of Michael: and you're proud of Ruth,
I take it?

JUDITH: Ay.

BELL: Then, where's the need for shame,
Because they were come-by-chances? A mean thief
That snivels, because the fruit he relishes
Is stolen; and keeps munching it to the core.
Married, and so lived happily ever after?
A deal of virtue in a wedding-ring:
And marriage-lines make all the difference, don't they?
Your man and mine were born in lawful wedlock:

And sober, honest, dutiful sons they've proved:
While our two bastards, Ruth and . . .
JUDITH: Never been
A better daughter!
BELL: Then, what would you have?
You've had her to yourself, without the worrit
Of a man to wear your soul out, all these years.
If I'd been married, before a week was through,
I'd have picked my husband's pocket, to buy rats' bane:
Envying the spiders who can gobble up
Husbands they've no more use for between meals.
But I wasn't born to kick my heels in air
For a plaguey husband: and if I'm to dangle,
'Twon't be for that, but something worth putting myself
Out of the way for. You say I'll scorn you, woman.
Who 'm I, to scorn? You're not my sort: but I ken
Too much of life for easy scorn: I've learnt
The lessons of the road.
JUDITH: I've known the road, too;
And learned its bitter . . .
BELL: You didn't relish it?
It's meat to me; but then, I like mixed pickles—
Life, with an edge, and a free hand with the pepper.
You can't make a good hotchpotch with only 'taties:
And a good hotchpotch I'm fairly famished for:
I've starved on the lean fare of Krindlesyke:
My mouth is watering for the old savoury mess—
Life, piping hot: for I'm no man-in-the-moon,
To sup off cold peaseporridge: and it's the wash
Of bitters over the tongue gives bite to the pepper:

But you've no taste for bitters, or devilled collops—
Roast scrag on Sunday : cold mutton and boiled 'taties
The rest of the week, is the most you'd ask of life—
Nay, a cup of milky tea by a white hearth—
And you're in heaven !

JUDITH : You're not far out.

BELL : I take
Mine, laced with rum, by a camp-fire under the stars ;
And not too dainty to mind the smatch of smoke.

JUDITH : Tastes differ.

BELL : Yet, for all my appetite,
At Krindlesyke, I'm a ewe overhead in a drift
That's cropped the grass round its feet, and mumbles its wool
For nourishment : and that's what you call life !
You're you : I'm I. It takes all turns for a circus :
And it's just the change and chances of the ring
Make the old game worth the candle : variety
At all costs : hurly-burly, razzle-dazzle—
Life, cowping creels through endless flaming hoops,
A breakneck business, ending with a crash,
If only in the big drum. The devil's to pay
For what we have, or haven't ; and I believe
In value for my money.

JUDITH : Peace and quiet
And a good home are worth . . .

BELL : But, you've no turn
For circuses : your heart's a pipeclayed hearthstone—
No ring for hoofs to trample to the clang
Of cymbals, blare of trumpets, rattle of drums :
No dash of brandy in your stirabout :

Porridge in peace, with a door 'twixt you and the
weather;
A sanded floor; and the glow and smother of peat:
But I'd rather be a lean pig, running free,
Than the fattest flitch of bacon on the rafters.
JUDITH: And yet, you've kept . . .
BELL: Ay: but my fingers
have itched
Sorely to fire the peatstack in a west wind,
That flames might swarm walls and rooftree, and
Krindlesyke,
Perishing in a crackle and golden flare-up,
Tumble a smoking ruin of blackened stone.
JUDITH: Yet, you've kept house . . .
BELL: Ay, true enough;
I've been
Cook, slut, and butler here this fifteen-year,
As thrang as Throp's wife when she hanged herself
With her own dishclout. Needs must, the fire will burn,
Barred in the grate: burn—nay, I've only smouldered
Like sodden peat. Ay, true, I've drudged; and yet,
What could I do against that old dead witch,
Lying in wait for me the day I came?
Her very patience was a kind of cunning
That challenged me, hinting I'd not have grit
To stand her life, even for a dozen years.
What could I do, but prove I could stick it out?
If I'd turned tail, she'd have bared her toothless gums
To grin at me: and how could I go through life,
Haunted by her dead smile? But now the spell
Is snapt: I've proved her wrong: she cannot hold me.

I've served my sentence: the cell-door opens: and yet,
You would have done that fifteen-years-hard willingly?
Some folk can only thrive in gaol—no nerve
To face the risks outside; and never happy
Till lagged for life: meals punctual and no cares:
And the king for landlord. While I've eaten my head off,
You've been a galled jade, fretting for the stable.
Tastes differ: but it's just that you're not my sort
Puzzles me why you gave yourself to Jim.

JUDITH: There are no whys and wherefores, when you love.

BELL: I gave myself to Peter, with a difference.
You'd have wed Jim: I just let Peter travel
With me, to keep the others from pestering;
And scooted him when Michael could manage the sheep.

JUDITH: You never loved him. I loved Jim . . .

BELL: A deal
Of difference that's made!

JUDITH: More than you can guess.

BELL: Peter stuck longer, tangled in the brambles.

JUDITH: I loved Jim; so, I trusted him.

BELL: But when
You found him out?

JUDITH: If you had loved, you'd ken
That finding out makes little difference.
There are things in this life you don't understand,
For all your ready tongue.

BELL: Ay: men and women
I've given up—just senseless marionettes,
Jigging and bobbing to the twitching strings:
Though I like to fancy I pick my steps, and choose

The tunes I dance to ; happen, that's my pride ;
But, choose or not, we've got to pay the piper.
JUDITH : Ay : in your pride, you think you've the best of life.
You're missing more than you reckon, the best of all.
BELL : Well, I've no turn for penal servitude.
But, have you never gabbed to keep your heart up ?
What are hats for, if not for talking through ?
Pride—we've both pride ; yours, hot and fierce, and mine
Careless and cold : yet, both came the same cropper—
Not quite . . . for you were hurt to death almost :
While I picked myself up, scatheless ; not a scratch ;
Only my skirt torn ; and it always draggled.
JUDITH : You never cared : I couldn't have borne myself,
If I'd not cared : I'd hate myself as much
As I've hated Jim, whiles, when I thought of all.
They're mixter-maxter, hate and love : and, often,
I've wondered if I loathed, or loved, Jim most.
I understand as little as you, it seems :
Yet, it's only caring counts for anything
In this life ; though it's caring's broken me.
BELL : It stiffens some. But, why take accidents
So bitterly ? It's all a rough-and-tumble
Of accidents, from the accident of birth
To the last accident that lays us out—
A go-as-you-please, and the devil take the hindmost.
It's pluck that counts, and an easy seat in the saddle :
Better to break your neck at the first ditch,
Than waste the day in seeking gates to slip through :

Cold-blooded crawlers I've no sort of use for.
You took the leap, and landed in the quickset:
But, at least, you leapt sky-high, before you tumbled:
And it's silly to lie moaning in the prickles:
Best pick yourself up sharp, and shake the thorns out,
Else the following hoofs will bash you. Give life leave
To break your heart, 'twill trample you . . .

JUDITH: Leave, say you?
Life takes French-leave: your heart's beneath the hoofs
Before . . .

BELL: But grin, and keep yourself heartwhole;
And you'll find the fun of the fair's in taking chances:
It's the uncertainty makes the race—no sport
In putting money on dead-certainties.
I back the dark horse; stake my soul against
The odds: and I'll not grouse if life should prove
A welsher in the end: I'll have had my fling,
At least: and yet talk's cheap . . .

JUDITH: Ay, cheap.

BELL: Dirt-cheap:
Three-shots-a-penny; and it's not every time
You hit Aunt Sally and get a good cigar,
Or even pot a milky coconut:
And, all this while, life's had the upper hand:
I slipt, the day I came; and lost my grip:
Life got me by the scruff of the neck, and held
My proud nose to the grindstone. My turn, now—
I'll be upsides with life, and teach it manners,
Before death gets the stranglehold: I'll have
The last laugh, though it choke me. And what's death,
To set us twittering? I'll be no frightened squirrel:

Scarting and scolding never yet scared death :
When he's a mind to crack me like a nut,
I'd be no husk : still ripe and milky, I'd have him
Swallow the kernel, and spit out the shell,
Before all's shrivelled to black dust. But, tombstones,
What's turned my thoughts to death ? It's these white
walls,
After a day in the open. When I came,
At first, these four walls seemed to close in on me,
As though they'd crush the life out : and I felt
I'd die between them : but, after all . . . And yet,
Who kens what green sod's to be broken for him ?
Queer, that I'll lie, like any innocent
Beneath the daisies ; but the gowans must wait.
Sore-punished, I'm not yet knocked out : life's had
My head in chancery ; but I'll soon be free
To spar another round or so with him,
Before he sends me spinning to the ropes.
And life would not be life, without the hazards.

JUDITH : Too many hazards for me.

BELL : Ay : so it seems :
But you're too honest for the tricky game.
I've a sort of honesty—a liar and thief
In little things—I'm honesty itself
In the things that matter—few enough, deuce kens :
But your heart's open to the day ; while mine's
A pitchy night, with just a star or so
To light me to cover at the keeper's step.
You're honest, to your hurt : your honesty's
A knife that cuts through all ; and will be cutting—
Hacking and jabbing, and thirsting to draw blood ;

And turning in the wound it makes—a gulley,
To cut your heart out, if you doubted it:
And so, you're faithful, even to a fool;
While I would just be faithful to myself.
You thrive on misery.

JUDITH: Nay: I've only asked
A little happiness of life: I've starved
For happiness, God kens.

BELL: What's happiness?
You've got a sweet-tooth; and don't relish life:
You want run-honey, when it's the honeycomb
That gives the crunch and flavour. Would you be
As happy as a maggot in a medlar,
Swelling yourself in sweet deliciousness,
Till the blackbird nips you? None escapes his crop.
You'd quarrel with the juiciest plum, because
Your teeth grit on the stone, instead of cracking
The shell, and savouring the bitter kernel.
Nigh all the jests life cracks have bitter kernels.

JUDITH: Ay, bitter enough to set my teeth on edge.

BELL: What are teeth for, if we must live on pap?
The sweetest marrow's in the hardest bone,
As you've found with Ruth, I take it.

JUDITH: Ay: and still,
You have been faithful, Bell.

BELL: A faithful fool,
Against the grain, this fifteen-year: my son
And that dead woman were too strong for me:
They turned me false to my nature; broke me in
Like a flea in harness, that draws a nutshell-coach.
Till then I'd jumped, and bit, at my own sweet will.

Oh! amn't I the wiseacre, the downy owl,
Fancying myself as knowing as a signpost?
And yet, there's always some new twist to learn.
Life's an old thimblerigger; and, it seems,
Can still get on the silly side of me,
Can still bamboozle me with his hanky-panky:
He always kens a trick worth two of mine;
Though he lets me spot the pea beneath the thimble
Just often enough to keep me in good conceit.
And he's kept you going, too, with Ruth to live for.

JUDITH: If it hadn't been for Ruth . . .

BELL: He kens, he kens:
As canny as he's cute, for his own ends,
He's a wise showman; and doesn't overfeed
The living skeleton or let the fat lady starve:
And so, we're each kept going, in our own kind,
Till we've served our turn. Mine's talking, you'll have gathered!

JUDITH: Ay, you've a tongue.

BELL: It rattles in my head
Like crocks in a mugger's cart: but I've had few
To talk with here; and too much time for brooding,
Turning things over and over in my own mind,
These fifteen years.

JUDITH: True: neighbours, hereabouts,
Are few, and far to seek.

BELL: The devil a chance
I've ever had of a gossip: and, as for news,
I've had to fall back on the wormy Bible
That props the broken looking-glass: so, now
I've got the chance of a crack, my tongue goes randy;

And patters like a cheapjack's, or a bookie's
Offering you odds against the favourite, life:
Or, wasn't life the dark horse? I have talked
My wits out, till I'm like a drunken tipster,
Too milled to ken the dark horse from the favourite.
My sharp tongue's minced my very wits to words.

JUDITH: Ay, it's been rattling round.

BELL: A slick tongue spares
The owner the fag of thinking: it's the listeners
Who get the headache. And yet, I could talk
At one time to some purpose—didn't dribble
Like a tap that needs a washer: and, by carties,
It's talking I've missed most: I've always been
Like an urchin with a withy—must be slashing—
Thistles for choice: and not once, since I came,
Have I had a real good shindy to warm my blood.

JUDITH: I'd have thought Ezra . . .

BELL: Ay: we fratched, at first;
For he'd a tongue of his own; and could use it, too,
Better than most menfolk—a bonnie sparrer,
I warrant, in his time; but past his best
Before I kenned him; little fight left in him:
And when his wits went cranky, he just havered—
Ground out his two tunes like a hurdygurdy,
With most notes missing and a creaky handle.

JUDITH: And Michael?

BELL: Michael! The lad will sit mumchance
The evening through: he's got a powerful gift
Of saying nothing: no sparks to strike off him;
Though he's had to serve as a whetstone, this long while,
To keep an edge on my tongue.

JUDITH: He's quiet?
BELL: Quiet!
A husband born. No need to fear for Ruth:
She's safe with Michael, safe for life.
JUDITH: He's steady?
BELL: He's not his mother's son: he banks his money;
And takes no hazards; never risks his shirt:
As canny as I'm spendthrift, he's the sort
Can pouch his cutty, half-smoked, ten minutes after
I've puffed away my pipeful. Ay: Ruth's safe.
His peatstacks never fire: he'll never lose
A lamb, or let a ewe slip through his hands,
For want of watching; though he go for nights
Without a nap. The day of Ezra's funeral,
A score of gimmers perished in the snow,
But not a ewe of Michael's: his were folded
Before the wind began to pile the drifts:
He takes no risks.
JUDITH: Ruth needs a careful man:
For she's the sort that's steady with the steady,
And a featherhead with featherheads. She's sense:
And Michael . . .
BELL: Michael's sense itself—a cob
Too steady to shy even at the crack of doom:
He'll keep the beaten track, the road that leads
To four walls, and the same bed every night.
Talk of the devil—but he's coming now
Up Bloodysyke: ay, and there's someone with him—
A petticoat, no less!
JUDITH: Mercy! It's Ruth:

Yet I didn't leave, till she was safely off
To work . . .
BELL: Work? Michael, too, had business
In Bellingham this morning, oddly enough.
Doubtless, they helped each other; and got through
The job the quicker, working well together:
And a parson took a hand in it for certain,
If I ken Michael: likes things proper, he does;
And always had a weakness for black lambs.
But, who'd have guessed he'd . . . Surely, there's a strain
Of Haggard in the young limb, after all:
No Haggard stops to ask a parent's leave,
Even should they happen to ken the old folk by sight:
My own I knew by hearsay. But, what luck
You're here to welcome the young pair.
JUDITH: No! They'll wonder . . .
I bring no luck to weddings . . . I must go . . .
BELL: You can't, without being spotted: but you can hide
Behind the door, till I speak with them.
JUDITH: No! No!
Not that door . . . I can't hide behind that door
Again.
BELL: That door? Well, you ken best what's been
Between that door and you. It's crazy and old,
But, it looks innocent, wooden-faced humbug: yet
I don't trust doors myself; they've got a knack
Of shutting me in. But you'll be snug enough
In the other room: I'd advise you to lie down,

And rest; you're looking trashed: and, come to think,
I've a deal to say to the bridegroom, before I go.

JUDITH: Go?

BELL: Quick, this way: step lively, or they'll catch
Your skirt-tail whisking round the doorcheek.

(BELL *hustles* JUDITH *into the inner room; closing the door behind her. She then thrusts the orange-coloured kerchief into her pocket; picks up the bracken, and flings it on the fire; seats herself on the settle, with her back to the door; and gazes at the blaze: not even glancing up, as* MICHAEL *and* RUTH *enter.*)

MICHAEL: Mother!

BELL: Is that you, Prodigal son? You're late, to-day,
As always when you've business in Bellingham.
That's through, I trust: those ewes have taken a deal
Of seeing to: and I'm lonely as a milestone,
When you're away.

MICHAEL: I've taken the last trip, mother:
That job's through: and I've made the best of bargains.
You'll not be lonely, now, when I'm not here:
I've brought you a daughter to keep you company.

BELL (*turning sharply*): I might have known you were no Prodigal son:
He didn't bring home even a single sausage,
For all his keeping company with swine.
But, what should I do with a daughter, lad?
Do you fancy, if I'd had a mind for daughters,
I couldn't have had a dozen of my own?
One petticoat's enough in any house:
And who are you, to bring your mother a daughter?

MICHAEL: Her husband. Ruth's my bride. Ruth Ellershaw
She was till ten o'clock: Ruth Barrasford,
Till doomsday, now.
BELL: When did I give you leave
To bring strange lasses to disturb my peace,
Just as I'm getting used to Krindlesyke?
To think you'd wed, without a word!
MICHAEL: Leave, say you?
You'll always have your jest. I said no word:
For words breed words: and I'd not have a swarm
Of stinging ants bumming about my lugs
For days beforehand.
BELL: Ants? They'd need be kaids,
To burrow through your fleece, and prog your skin.
MICHAEL: I'd as lief ask leave of the tricky wind as you:
And, leave or not, I'd see you damned, if you tried
To part us. None of your games! I'm no young wether,
To be let keep his old dam company;
Trotting beside her . . .
BELL: Cock-a-whoop, my lad!
Well done, for you, Ruth, lass; you've kindled him,
As I could never do, for all my chaff.
I little dreamt he'd ever turn lobstroplous:
I hardly ken him, with his dander up,
Swelling and bridling like a bubblyjock.
If I pricked him now, he'd bleed red blood—not ewe's milk:
The flick of my tongue can nettle him at last:

His haunches quiver, for all his woolly coat;
He'll prove a Haggard, yet. Nay—he said "husband":
No Haggard I've heard tell on's been a husband:
But, if your taste's for husbands, lass, you're suited,
Till doomsday, as he says. He kens his mind:
When barely breeched, he chose to bide with sheep;
Though he might have travelled with horses: and it's sheep
His heart is set on still. But, I've no turn
For certainties myself: no sheep for me:
Life, with a tossing mane, and clattering hoofs,
The chancy life for me—not certain death,
With the stink of tar and sheepdip in my nostrils.

MICHAEL: Life, with a clattering tongue, you mean to say.

BELL: Well: you're a bonnie lass, I must admit:
And, if I'd fancied daughters, I might have done
Much worse than let young Michael pick them for me:
He's not gone poseying in the kitchen garden.
I never guessed he'd an eye for aught but ewes:
As, blind as other mothers, I'd have sworn
I'd kenned him, inside-out, since he was—nay!
But he was never a rapscallion ripstitch—
Always a prim and proper little man,
A butter-won't-melt-in-my-mouth young sobersides,
Since he found his own feet. Yet, the blade that's wed—
The jack-knife, turned into a pair of scissors—
Without a word, is not the son I thought him.
There's something of his mammy, after all,
In Michael: and as for you, my lass, you're just
Your minney's very spit.

RUTH: You ken my mother?
BELL: Ken Judith Ellershaw? You'll ask me, next,
If I'm acquainted with Bell Haggard. Well,
Gaping for turnips, Michael?
MICHAEL: I never heard . . .
BELL: What have you heard this fifteen-year, except
The bleat of sheep, till Ruth's voice kittled your ear?
But, Judith sent some message by her daughter?
RUTH: She doesn't ken I've come: nay, doesn't dream
I'm married even; though I meant to tell her
This morning; but I couldn't: she started so,
When I let slip Michael's name; and turned so pale.
I don't know why; but I feared some word of hers
Might come between us: and I couldn't let
Even my mother come between us now:
So, I pretended to set out for work
As usual: then, when we were married, went back
With Michael, to break the news. But the door was locked:
And neighbours said she was out—been gone some time:
And Michael was impatient to be home:
So, I had to come. I can't think what has happened.
I hated leaving her like that: I've never
In all my life done such a thing.
BELL: Well, Michael
Should be relieved to learn it's a first offence.
RUTH: She'd gone without a word . . .
BELL: A family failing—
And, happen, on like errand to your own.
RUTH: Mother? Nay, she's too old: you said you knew her.

BELL: Ay, well enough to reckon I'm her elder:
And who's to tell me I'm too old to marry?
A woman is never too old for anything:
It's only men grow sober and faint-hearted:
And Judith's just the sort whose soul is set
On a husband and a hearthstone: I ken that.
RUTH: Nay: mother'll never marry.
BELL: You can speak
With all the cock-a-whoop of ignorance:
For you're too young to dare to doubt your wisdom.
It's a wise man, or a fool, can speak for himself,
Let alone for others, in this haphazard life.
But give me a young fool, rather than an old—
A plucky plunger, than a canny crone
Who's old enough to ken she doesn't ken.
You're right: for doubting is a kind of dotage:
Experience ages and decays; while folk
Who never doubt themselves die young—at ninety.
Age never yet brought gumption to a ninny:
And you cannot reckon up a stranger's wits
By counting his bare patches and grey hairs:
It's seldom sense that makes a bald head shine:
And I'm not partial to Methuselahs.
Keep your cocksureness, while you can: too soon,
Time plucks the feathers off you; and you lie,
Naked and skewered, with not a cock-a-doodle,
Or flap of the wings to warm your heart again.
And so, you quitted your mammy, without a word,
When the jockey whistled?
RUTH: Nay: I left a letter:
'Twas all I could do.

BELL: She's lost a daughter; and got
A bit of paper, instead: and what have I,
For my lost son?
MICHAEL: You've lost no son; but gained
A daughter. You'll always live with us.
BELL: Just so.
I've waited for you to say that: and it comes pat.
You'll think his thoughts; and mutter them in your mind,
Before he can give them tongue, Ruth. He's not said
An unexpected thing since he grew out
Of his first breeches: and, like the most of men,
He speaks so slowly, you can almost catch
The creaking of his wits between the words.
RUTH: Well: I've a tongue for two: and you, yourself,
Don't lack for . . .
BELL: So, all's settled: you've arranged
The world for your convenience; and have planned
Your mothers' lives between you? I'm to be
The dear old grannie in the ingleneuk;
And hide my grizzled wisps in a mutch with frills?
Nay, God forbid! I'm no tame pussycat,
To snuggle on the corner of a settle,
With one eye open for the chance-thrown titbit,
While the good housewife goes about her duties:
Me! lapping with blinking eyes and possing paws,
The saucer of skim-milk that young skinflint spares me,
And purring, when her darlings pull my tail—
Great-grandchildren, too, to Ezra, on both sides.
Ay: you may gape like a brace of guddled brandling:
But that old bull-trout's grandsire to you both;

And a double dose of his blue blood will run
In the veins of your small fry—if fish have veins.
MICHAEL: You surely never mean to say . . .
BELL: I do.
More than a little for you young know-alls to learn,
When you meet Judith Ellershaw: for havers
As it sounds to your young lugs, the world went round,
And one or two things happened, before you were born.
Yet, none of us kens what life's got up his sleeve:
He's played so long: and had a deal of practice,
Since he sat down with Adam: he's always got
A trump tucked out of sight, that takes the trick.
But, son, you've lived with me for all these years;
And yet ken me so little? Grannie's mutch-frills!
I'd as lief rig myself in widow's weeds
For my fancy man, who may have departed this life,
For all I ken or care.
MICHAEL: Come, hold your tongue:
Enough of shameless talk. I'm master, now:
And I'll not have Ruth hear this radgy slack.
If you've no shame yourself, I'll find a way
To bridle your loose tongue: so mind yourself:
I'll have no tinker's tattle.
BELL: The tinker's brat
Rides the high-horse now, mounted on prime mutton.
Ruth, lass, you're safe, you're safe—if safety's all:
He'll never guess your heart, unless you blab.
I've never told him mine: I've kept him easy,
Till he'd found someone else to victual him,
And make his bed, and darn his hose; and you
Seem born to take the job out of my hands.

RUTH: But I'd not come between you . . .
BELL: Think not, lass?
I bear you no ill-will: you set me free.
I'm a wildcat, all bristling fur and claws:
At Krindlesyke, I've been a wildcat, caged:
And Michael never twigged! Son, don't you mind
The day we came—was I a tabby then?
The day we came here, with no thought to bide,
Once we had got the plunder; and were trapped
Between these four white walls by a dead woman?
She held me—forced my feet into her shoes—
Held me for your sake. Ay: there seemed some link
'Twixt your dead grannie and you, too strong for me
To break; though it's been strained to the snapping-point,
Times out of mind, whenever a hoolet's screech
Sang through my blood; or poaching foxes barked
On a shiny night to the cackle of wild geese,
Travelling from sea to sea far overhead:
Or whenever, waking in the quiet dark,
The ghosts of horses whinneyed in my heart.
Ghosts! Nay, I've been the mare between the limmers
Who hears the hunters gallop gaily by;
Or, rather, the hunter, bogged in a quaking moss,
Fankit in sluthery strothers, belly-deep,
With the tune of the horn tally-hoing through her blood,
As the field sweeps out of sight.
MICHAEL: Wildcats and hunters—
A mongrel breed, eh, Ruth?

BELL: . But, now it seems,
I can draw my hocks out of the clungy sump
I've floundered in so long; and, snuffing the wind,
Shew a clean pair of heels to Krindlesyke.
A mongrel breed, say you? And who but a man
Could have a wildcat-hunter making his bed
For him for fifteen-year, and never know it?
But, the old wife's satisfied, at last: she should be:
She's had my best years: I've grown old and grizzled,
And full of useless wisdom, in her service.
She's taught me much: for I've had time and to spare,
Brooding among these God-forsaken fells,
To turn life inside-out in my own mind;
And study every thread of it, warp and weft.
I'm far from the same woman who came here:
And I'll take up my old life with a difference,
Now she and you've got no more use for me:
You've squeezed me dry betwixt you.
MICHAEL: Dry, do you say?
The Tyne's in spate; and we must swim for life,
Eh, Ruth? But, you'll soon get used . . .
BELL: She's done
with me.
She'll not be sorry to lose me: I fancy, at times,
She felt she'd got more than she'd bargained for—
A wasp, rampaging in her spider's web.
"Far above rubies" has never been my line,
Though I could wag a tongue with Solomon,
Like the Queen of Sheba herself: I doubt if she
Rose in the night to give meat to her household.
She must have been an ancestor of mine:

For she'd traik any distance for a crack,
The gipsy-hearted ganwife that she was.

MICHAEL: Wildcats and hunters and the Queen of Sheba—
A royal family, Ruth, you've married into!

BELL: But now I can kick Eliza's shoes sky-high:
Nay—I must shuffle them quietly off; and lay
The old wife's shoes decently by the hearth,
As I found them when I came—a slattern stopgap—
Ready for the young wife to step into.
They'll fit her, as they never fitted me:
For all her youth, they will not gall her heels,
Or give her corns: she's the true Cinderella:
The clock has struck for her; and the dancing's done;
And the Prince has brought her home—to wash the dishes.
But now I'm free: and I'll away to-night.
My bones have been restless in me all day long:
They felt their freedom coming, before I kenned.
I've little time to lose: I'm getting old—
Stiff-jointed in my wits, that once were nimble
As a ferret among the bobtails, old and dull.
A night or so may seem to matter little,
When I've already lost full fifteen-year:
But I hear the owls call: and my fur's a-tingle:
The Haggard blood is pricking in my veins.

(*She loosens the string of her apron, which slips to the ground, kilts her skirt to her knee, takes the orange-coloured kerchief from her pocket, and twists it about her head; while* MICHAEL *and* RUTH *watch the transformation in amazement.*)

MICHAEL: But you don't mean to leave us?
BELL: Pat it comes:
You've just to twitch the wire and the bell rings:
You'll learn the trick, soon, Ruth. (*To* MICHAEL) Bat,
don't you see
I've just put on my nightcap, ready for bed—
Grannie's frilled mutch? I leave you, Michael? Son,
The time came, as it comes to every man,
When you'd to make a choice betwixt two women.
You've made your choice: and chosen well: but I,
Who've always done the choosing, and never yet
Tripped to the beck of any man, or bobbed
To any living woman—I'm free to follow
My own bent, now that that old witch's fingers
Have slackened their cold clutch; and your dead
grannie
Has gained her ends, and seen you settled down
At Krindlesyke: and from this on I, too,
Am dead to you. You'll soon enough forget me:
The world would end if a man could not forget
His mother's deathbed in his young wife's arms—
I'm far from corpse-cold yet; and it may be years
Before they pluck Bell Haggard's kerchief off,
To tie her chin up with, and ripe her pockets
Of her last pennies to shut up her eyes.
Even then, they'll have to tug the chin-clout tight,
To keep her tongue from wagging. Well, my son,
So, it's good-bye till doomsday.
MICHAEL: You're not going?
I thought you only havered. You can't go.
Do you think I'd let you go, and . . .

BELL: Hearken, Ruth:
That's the true husband's voice: for husbands think,
If only they are headstrong and high-handed,
They're getting their own way: they charge, head-down,
At their own image in the window-glass;
And don't come to their senses till their carcase
Is spiked with smarting splinters. But I'm your mother,
Not your tame wife, lad: and I'll go my gait.
MICHAEL: You shall not go, for all your crazy cackle—
My mother, on the road, a tinker's baggage,
While I've a roof to shelter her!
BELL: You pull
The handle downwards towards you, and the beer
Spouts out. No hope for you, Ruth: lass, you're safe—
Safe as a linnet in a cage, for life:
No need to read your hand, to tell your fortune:
No gallivanting with the dark-eyed stranger,
Calleevering over all the countryside,
When the owls are hooting to the hunter's moon,
For the wife of Michael Barrasford. Well, boy,
What if I choose to be a tinker's baggage?
It was a tinker's baggage mothered you—
For tying a white apron round the waist
Has never made a housewife of a gipsy—
And a tinker's baggage went out of her way
To set you well on yours: and now she turns.
MICHAEL: You shall not go, I say. I'm master here:

And I won't let you shame me. I've been decent;
And have always done my duty by the sheep,
Working to keep a decent home together
To bring a wife to: and, for all your jeers,
There are worse things for a woman than a home
And husband and a lawful family.
You shall not go. You say I ken my mind . . .

BELL: Ay: but not mine. What should a tinker's trollop
Do in the house of Michael Barrasford,
But bring a blush to his children's cheeks? God help them,
If they take after me, if they've a dash
Of Haggard blood—for ewe's milk laced with brandy
Is like to curdle: or, happen, I should say,
God help their father!

MICHAEL: Mother, why should you go?
Why should you want to travel the ditch-bottom,
When you've a hearth to sit by, snug and clean?

BELL: The fatted calf's to be killed for the prodigal mother?
You've not the hard heart of the young cockrobin
That's got no use for parents, once he's mated:
But I'm, somehow, out of place within four walls,
Tied to one spot—that never wander the world.
I long for the rumble of wheels beneath me; to hear
The clatter and creak of the lurching caravan;
And the daylong patter of raindrops on the roof:
Ay, and the gossip of nights about the campfire—
The give-and-take of tongues: mine's getting stiff
For want of use, and spoiling for a fight.

MICHAEL: Nay: still as nimble and nippy as a flea!
BELL: But, I could talk, at one time! There are days
When the whole world's hoddendoon and draggletailed,
Drooked through and through; and blury, gurly days
When the wind blows snell: but it's something to be stirring,
And not shut up between four glowering walls,
Like blind white faces; and you never ken
What traveller your wayside fire will draw
Out of the night, to tell outlandish tales,
Or crack a jest, or start quarrel with you,
Till the words bite hot as ginger on the tongue.
Anger's the stuff to loose a tongue grown rusty:
And keep it in good fettle for all chances.
I'm sick of dozing by a dumb hearthstone—
And the peat, with never a click or crackle in it—
Famished for news.
MICHAEL: For scandal.
BELL: There's no scandal
For those who can't be scandalized—just news:
All's fish that comes to their net. I was made
For company.
MICHAEL: And you'd go back again
To that tag-rag-and-bobtail? What's the use
Of a man's working to keep a decent home,
When his own mother tries to drag him down?
BELL: Nay: my pernicketty, fine gentleman,
But I'll not drag you down: you're free of me:
I've slipt my apron off; and you're tied now
To your wife's apron-strings: for menfolk seem
Uneasy on the loose, and never happy

Unless they're clinging to some woman's skirt.
I'm out of place in any decent house,
As a kestrel in a hencoop. Ay, you're decent:
But, son, remember a man's decency
Depends on his braces; and it's I who've sewn
Your trouser-buttons on; so, when you fasten
Your galluses, give the tinker's baggage credit.
She's done her best for you; and scrubbed and scoured,
Against the grain, for all these years, to keep
Your home respectable; though, in her heart,
Thank God, she's never been respectable—
No dry-rot in her bones, while she's alive:
Time and to spare for decency in the grave.
So, you can do your duty by the sheep,
While I go hunting with the jinneyhoolets—
Birds of a feather—ay, and fleece with fleece:
And when I'm a toothless, mumbling crone, you'll be
So proper a gentleman, 'twill be hard to tell
The shepherd from the sheep. Someone must rear
The mutton and wool, to keep us warm and fed;
But that's not my line: please to step this way
For the fancy goods and fakish faldalals,
Trinkets and toys and fairings. Son, you say,
You're master here: well, that's for Ruth to settle:
I'll be elsewhere. I've never knuckled down
To any man: and I'll be coffin-cold
Before I brook a master; so, good-night,
And pleasant dreams; and a long family
Of curly lambkins, bleating round the board.

RUTH: Michael, you'll never let her go alone?
She's only talking wild, because she's jealous.

Mothers are always jealous, when their sons
Bring home a bride: though she needn't be uneasy:
I'd never interfere . . .

BELL: Too wise to put
Your fingers 'twixt the cleaver and the block?
Jealous—I wonder? Anyhow, it seems,
I've got a daughter, too. Alone, you say?
However long I stayed, I'd have to go
Alone, at last: and I'd as lief be gone,
While I can carry myself on my two pins.
Being buried with the Barrasfords is a chance
I've little mind to risk a second time:
I'm too much of a Haggard, to want to rise,
At the last trump, among a flock of bleaters.
If I've my way, there'll be stampeding hoofs
About me, startled at the crack of doom.

MICHAEL: When you've done play-acting . . .

BELL: Play-acting?
Ay: I'm through:
Exit the villain: ring the curtain down
On the happy ending—bride and bridegroom seated
On either side the poor, but pious, hearth.

MICHAEL: I'd as soon argue with a weathercock
As with a woman . . .

BELL: Yet the weathervanes
Are always cocks, not hens.

MICHAEL: You shall not go.

BELL: Your naked hurdles cannot hold the wind.

MICHAEL: Wind? Ay, I'm fairly tewed and hattered with words:
And yet, for all your wind, you shall not go.

BELL: While you've a roof to shelter me, eh, son?
You mean so well; and understand so little.
Yours is a good thick fleece—no skin that twitches
When a breath tickles it. Sheep will be sheep,
And horses, horses, till the day of judgment.

MICHAEL: Better a sound tup than a spavined nag.

BELL: Ay, Ruth, you've kindled him! Good luck to you:
And may your hearthfire warm you to the end.
(*To* MICHAEL.)
You've been a good son to me, in your way:
Only, our ways are different; and here they part.
For all my blether, there's no bitterness
On my side: I've long kenned 'twas bound to come:
And, in your heart, you know it's for the best,
For your sake, and for Ruth's sake, and for mine.
I couldn't obey, where I have bid; nor risk
My own son's fathering me in second childhood:
And you'd not care to have me like old Ezra,
A dothering haiveril in your chimney corner,
Babbling of vanished gold? I read my fortune
In the flames just now: and I'll not rot to death:
It's time enough to moulder, underground.
My death'll come quick and chancy, as I'd have had
Each instant of life: but still there are risky years
Before me, and a sudden, unlooked-for ending.
And I'll not haunt you: ghosts enough, with Ezra,
Counting his ghostly sovereigns all night long,
And old Eliza, darning ghostly stockings.
My ghost will ride a broomstick. . . .

(*As she speaks, the inner door opens, and* RUTH *and* MICHAEL, *turning sharply at the click of the latch, gaze, dumbfounded, at* JUDITH ELLERSHAW, *standing in the doorway.*)

BELL: Fee-fo-fum!
The barguest bays; and boggles, brags, and bo-los
Follow the hunt. How's that for witchcraft, think you?
Hark, how the lych-owl screeches!

RUTH (*running to her mother's arms*): Mother, you!

BELL: Now there's a sweet, domestic picture for you!
My cue's to vanish in a puff of smoke
And reek of brimstone, like the witch I am.
I'm coming, hoolet, my old cat with wings!
It's time I was away: there never yet
Was room for two grandmothers in one house.
I'm through with Krindlesyke. Good-bye, old gaol!

(*While* MICHAEL *still gazes at* RUTH *and her mother in amazement,* BELL HAGGARD *slips out of the door, unnoticed, and away through the bracken in the gathering dusk. An owl hoots.*)

PART III

A wet afternoon in May, six years later. The table is already set for tea. JUDITH ELLERSHAW *sits, knitting, by the hearth; a cradle with a young baby in it by her side. The outer door is closed, but unlatched. Presently the unkempt head of a man appears furtively at the window; then vanishes. The door is pushed stealthily open: and* JIM BARRASFORD, *ragged and disreputable (and some twenty years older than when he married* PHŒBE MARTIN) *stands on the threshold a moment, eyeing* JUDITH'S *unconscious back in silence: then he speaks, limping towards her chair.*

JIM: While the cat calleevers the hills of Back-o'-Beyont,
The rats make free of the rick: and so, you doubled,
As soon as my hurdies were turned on Krindlesyke,
And settled yourself in the ingle?

JUDITH (*starting up, and facing him*): Jim!

JIM: Ay, Jim—
No other, Judith. I'll be bound you weren't
Just looking to see me: you seem overcome

By the unexpected pleasure. Your pardon, mistress,
If I intrude. By crikes! But I'm no ghost
To set you adither: you don't see anything wrong—
No, no! What should you see? I startled you.
Happen I look a wee bit muggerishlike—
A ragtag hipplety-clinch: but I've been travelling
Mischancy roads; and I'm fair muggert-up.
Yet, why should that stagnate you? Where's the sense
Of expecting a mislucket man like me
To be as snod and spruce as a young shaver?
But I'm all right: there's naught amiss with Jim,
Except too much of nothing in his belly.
A good square meal, and a pipe, and a decent night's rest,
And I'll be fit as a fiddle. I've hardly slept . . .
Well, now I'm home, I'll make myself at home.

(*He seizes the loaf of bread from the table; hacks off a hunch with his jack-knife; and wolfs it ravenously.*)

JUDITH: Home? You've come home, Jim?

JIM: Nay, I'm my own fetch!
God's truth! there's little else but skin and bone
Beneath these tatters: just a two-legged boggart,
With naught but wind to fill my waim—small wonder
You're maiselt, to see a scarecrow stottering in—
For plover's eggs and heather-broth don't sleek
A wrinkled hide or swell a scrankit belly.
But still, what should there be to flabbergast you
About a man's returning to his home?
Naught wrong in coming home, I hope? By gox,
A poor lad can't come home, but he's cross-questioned,

And stared at like . . . Why do you stare like that?
It's I should be agape, to find you here:
But no, I'm not surprised: you can't surprise me:
I'm a travelled man: I've seen the world; and so,
Don't look for gratitude. My eyes were opened,
Once and for all, by Phœbe and you, that day—
Nigh twenty-year since: and they've not been shut . . .
By gum, that's so! it seems like twenty-year
Since I'd a wink of sleep . . . And, anyway,
I've heard the story, all the goings-on;
And a pretty tale it is: for I'd a drink,
A sappy-crack with that old windywallops,
Sep Shanks, in a bar at Bellingham: and he let out
How you'd crawled back to Krindlesyke with your daughter—
Our daughter, I should say: and she, no less,
Married to Peter's son: though how the deuce
You picked him up, is more that I can fashion.
Sep had already had his fill of cheerers,
Before I met him; and that last rum-hot
Was just the drop too much: and he got fuddled.
Ay, Sep was mortal-clay, the addled egg:
And I couldn't make head or tail of his hiccuping,
Though he tried to make himself plain: he did his best,
Did Sep: I'll say that for him—tried so hard
To make himself plain, he got us both chucked out:
And I left him in the gutter, trying still.

JUDITH: You've come from Bellingham hiring?

JIM: I couldn't stand
The dindum: felt fair-clumpered in that cluther—
Such a hubblyshew of gowks and flirtigigs,

Craking and cackling like a gabble of geese:
And folk kept looking: I might have been a bizen,
The way they gaped: so I thought I'd just win home
For a little peace and quiet. Where's my daughter,
And this young cuckoo, calls himself my nephew,
And has made himself free and easy of my nest?
Ay, but you've fettled things nicely, the lot of you,
While I tramped the hungry roads. He's pinched my job:
But I bear no grudge: it's not a job I'm after,
Since I've a married daughter I can live with.
I've seen the world, a sight too much: and I mean
To settle down, and end my days in peace
In my old home.

JUDITH: Your home? But you can't stay here.

JIM: You'll see! Now that I'm home, I mean to clag
Like a cleaver to a flagstone: they'll have to lift
The hearth, to get me out of Krindlesyke.
I've had enough of travelling the turnpike,
Houffling and hirpling like a cadging faa:
And, but for you and your brat, I'd settled down,
A respectable married man, this twenty-year.
But you shan't drive me from my home again.

JUDITH: We drove you?

JIM: You began it, anyway—
Made me an April-gowk and laughing-stock,
Till I couldn't face the neighbours' fleers. By joes!
You diddled me out of house and home, among you:
And settled yourselves couthily in my calfyard,

Like maggots in a muckheap, while I went cawdrife.
But I've had my fill of it, Judith, Hexham-measure:
I'm home for good: and isn't she my daughter?
You stole her from me once, when you made off
With hoity-toity Phœbe—ay, I ken
She died: I learned it at the time—you sneaked
My only bairn: I cannot mind her name,
If ever I heard it: you kept even that
From me, her dad. But, anyway, she's mine:
I've only her and you to turn to now:
A poor, lone widower I've been any time
This twenty-year: that's what's been wrong with me,
Though it hadn't entered my noddle till this minute.
But where's the canny couple?

JUDITH: Ruth and Michael
Are at the hiring.

JIM: Well, I'll not deny
That suits my book. I'd a notion, Judith lass,
I'd find you alone, and make my peace with you,
Before I tackled the young folk. Poor relations
Aren't made too welcome in this ungrateful world—
Least so, by those who've taken the bread from their mouths,
And beggared them of bit and brat: and so
I thought 'twould be more couthy-like with you,
Just having a crack and talking old times over,
Till I was more myself. I don't like strangers,
Not even when they're my own flesh and blood:
They've got a trick of staring at a man:
And all I want is to be let alone—
Just let alone . . . By God, why can't they let me

Alone! But you are kind and comfortable:
And you won't heckle me and stare at me:
For I'm not quite myself: I'll own to that—
I'm not myself . . . Though who the devil I am
I hardly ken . . . I've been that hunted and harried.

JUDITH: Hunted?

JIM: Ay, Judith—in a manner of speaking,
Hunted's the word: and I'm too old for the sport.
I'm getting on in years: and you're no younger
Than when I saw you last—you mind the day,
My wedding-day? A fine fligarishon
You made of it between you, you and Phœbe:
And wasn't she the high and mighty madam,
The niffy-naffy don't-come-nigh-me nonesuch?
But I've forgiven her: I bear no malice.

JUDITH: You bear no malice: and she died of it!

JIM: Ay, ay: she showed some sense of decency
In that, at least: though she got her sting in first
Like an angry bee. But, Judith, doesn't it seem
We two are tokened to end our days together?
Nothing can keep us parted, seemingly:
So let bygones be bygones.

(*Catching sight of the cradle.*)
What, another!
Have you always got a brat about you, Judith?
Last time you sprang a daughter on me, and now . . .
But I'm forgetting how the years have flitted.
Don't tell me I'm a grandfather?

JUDITH: The boy
Is Ruth's.

JIM: Well, I've come into a family,
And no mistake—a happy family:
And I was born to be a family-man.
They'll never turn against their bairn's granddad:
And I'm in luck.
JUDITH: You cannot bide here, Jim.
JIM: And who the hell are you, to say me nay?
JUDITH: The boy's grandmother.
JIM: Ay: and so the grandam's
To sit in the ingleneuk, while granddad hoofs it?
JUDITH: When you left Krindlesyke, you quitted it
For good and all.
JIM: And yet, I'm here again,
Unless I'm dreaming. It seems we all come back
To Krindlesyke, like martins to the byre-baulks:
It draws us back—can't keep away, nohow.
Ay, first and last, the old gaol is my home.
You're surely forgetting . . .
JUDITH: I'm forgetting nothing.
It's you've the knack of only recollecting
What you've a mind to. How could you have come
If you remembered all these walls have seen?
JIM: So walls have eyes as well as ears? I can't
Get away from eyes . . . But they'll not freeze my blood,
Or stare me out of countenance: they've no tongues
To tittle-tattle: they're no tell-tale-tits,
No slinking skeadlicks, nosing and sniffing round,
To wink and nod when I turn my back, colloguing,
With heads together, to lay me by the heels.

Nay: I'm not fleyed of a bit of whitewashed plaister.
But you're a nice one to welcome home a traveller
With "cannots" and clavers of eyes. Why can't you let
Things rest, and not hark back, routing things out,
And casting them in my teeth? Why must you lug
The dead to light—dead days? . . . I'm not afraid
Of corpses: the dead are dead: their eyes are shut:
Leastways, they cannot glower when once the mould's
Atop of them: though they follow a chap round the room,
Seeking the coppers to clap them to . . . dead eyes
Can't wink: and twopence shuts their bravest stare.
So, ghosts won't trouble my rest at Krindlesyke.
I vowed that I'd sleep sound at Krindlesyke,
When I . . .

JUDITH: You cannot bide.

JIM: I bear no malice.
Why can't you let bygones be bygones? But that's
A woman all over; must be raking up
The ashes into a glow, and puffing them red,
To roast a man for what he did, or didn't,
Twenty-year syne. Why should you still bear malice?

JUDITH: I bear no malice: but you cannot bide.

JIM: Why do you keep cuckooing "cannot, cannot"?
And who's to turn me out of Krindlesyke,
Where I was born and bred, I'd like to ken?
You can't gainsay it's my home.

JUDITH: Not your home now.

JIM: Then who the devil's home . . .

JUDITH: It's Ruth's and Michael's.

JIM: My daughter's and her man's: their home's my home.

JUDITH: You shall not stay.

JIM: It's got to "shall not" now?

The cuckoo's changed his tune; but I can't say
I like the new note better: it's too harsh:
The gowk's grown croupy. But, lass, I never thought
You'd be harsh with me: yet even you've turned raspy . . .
First "cannot," then . . .

JUDITH: Nay! I'll not have their home
Pulled down about their ears by any man;
And least of all by you—the home they've made . . .

JIM: Stolen, I'd say.

JUDITH: Together, for themselves
And their three boys.

JIM: Jim, granddad three times over?
It's well you broke it piecemeal: the old callant's
A waffly heart; and any sudden joy
Just sets it twittering: but the more the merrier!

JUDITH: You shall not wreck their happiness. I'd not dreamed
Such happiness as theirs could be in this world.
Since it was built, there's not been such a home
At Krindlesyke: it's only been a house . . .

JIM: 'Twas just about as homely as a hearse
In my young days: but my luck's turned, it seems.

JUDITH: It takes more than four walls to make a home,

And such a home as Michael's made for Ruth.
Though she's a fendy lass; she's too like me,
And needs a helpmate, or she'll waste herself;
And, with another man, she might have wrecked,
Instead of building. She's got her man, her mate:
Husband and father, born, day in, day out,
He works to keep a home for wife and weans.
There's never been a luckier lass than Ruth:
Though she deserves it, too; and it's but seldom
Good lasses are the lucky ones; and few
Get their deserts in this life.

JIM: True, egox!

JUDITH: Few, good or bad. But Ruth has everything—
A home, a steady husband, and her boys.
There never were such boys.

JIM: A pretty picture:
It takes my fancy: and the dear old grannie,
Why do you leave her out? And there's a corner
For granddad in it, surely—an armchair
On the other side of the ingle, with a pipe
And packet of twist, and a pot of nappy beer,
Hot-fettled four-ale, handy on the hob?
Ay: there's the chair: I'd best secure it now.

(*As he seats himself, with his back to the door, the head of* BELL HAGGARD, *in her orange-coloured kerchief, peeps round the jamb: then slowly withdraws, unseen of* JIM *or* JUDITH.)

JIM: Fetch up the swipes and shag. I can reach the cutty . . .

(*He takes down* MICHAEL'S *pipe from the mantel-shelf; and sticks it between his teeth: but* JUDITH *snatches at it, breaking the stem, and flings the bowl on the fire.*)

JUDITH: And you, to touch his pipe!

(JIM *stares at her, startled, as she stands before him, with drawn face and set teeth: then, still eyeing her uneasily, begins to bluster.*)

JIM: You scarting randy!
I'll teach you manners. That's a good three-halfpence
Smashed into smithereens: and all for nothing.
I've lammed a wench for less. I've half a mind
To snap you like the stopple, you yackey-yaa!
De'il rive your sark! It's long since I've had the price
Of a clay in my pouch: and I'm half-dead for a puff.
What's taken you? What's set you agee with me?
You used to like me; and you always seemed
A menseful body: and I lippened to you.
But you're just a wheepie-leekie weathercock
Like the lave of women, when a man's mislucket,
Moidart and mismeaved and beside himself.
I fancied I'd be in clover at Krindlesyke,
With you and all: but, sink me, if I haven't
Just stuck my silly head into a bee-bike!
What's turned you vicious? I only want to smoke
A cutty in peace: and you go on the rampage.
I mustn't smoke young master's pipe, it seems—
His pipe, no less! Young cock-a-ride-a-roosie
Is on the muckheap now; and all the hens
Are clucking round him. I ken what it is:
The cockmadendy's been too easy with you.

It doesn't do to let you womenfolk
Get out of hand. It's time I came, i' faiks,
To pull you up, and keep you in your place.
I'll have no naggers, narr-narring all day long:
I'll stand no fantigues. If the cull's too soft . . .

JUDITH: Soft, did you say? I've seen him hike a man,
And a heftier man than you, over a dyke,
For yarking a lame beast. That drover'll mind—
Ay, to his dying day, he'll not forget
He once ran into something hard.

JIM: Ay—ay . . .
He's that sort, is he? My luck is out again.
I want a quiet life, to be let alone:
And Krindlesyke won't be a bed of roses,
With that sort ramping round. (*Starting uneasily.*)
What's that? I thought . . .
There's no one in the other room, is there?
I've a feeling in my bones somebody's listening.
You've not deceived me, Judith? You've not trapped . . .
I'm all a-swither, sweating like a brock.
I little dreamt you'd turn against me, Judith:
But even here I don't feel safe now.

JUDITH: Safe?

JIM: So you don't know? I fancied everyone kenned.
Else why the devil should they stare like that?
And when you, too, looked . . . Nay, how could you learn?
I'm davered, surely: Seppy Shank's rum
Has gone to my noddle: drink's the very devil
On an empty waim: and I never had a head.

What have I done? Ay, wouldn't you like to ken,
To holler on the hounds?

JUDITH: Jim!

JIM: But what matter
Whether you ken or not? You've done for me
Already, dang you, with your hettle-tongue:
You've put the notion in my head, the curs
Are on my scent: and now, I cannot rest.
Happen, they're slinking now up Bloodysyke,
Like adders through the bent . . . Nay, they don't yelp,
The hounds that sleuth me: it's only in my head
I hear the yapping: they're too cunning to yelp.
The sleichers slither after me on their bellies,
As dumb and slick as adders . . . But I'm doitered,
And doting like a dobby. I want to sleep . . .
A good night's rest would pull my wits together.
I swore I'd sleep . . . but I couldn't close an eye, now
Since . . .

JUDITH: Jim, what ails you? Tell me what you've done.
I'm sorry, Jim . . .

JIM: I swear I never set out
To do it, Judith; and the thing was done,
Before I came to my senses: that's God's truth:
And may hell blast . . . You're sorry? Nay, but Jim's
Too old a bird to be caught with chaff. You're fly:
But, Jim's fly, too. No: mum's the word.

JUDITH: O Jim,
You, surely, never think I'd . . .

JIM: I don't know.

A man in my case can't tell who to trust,
When every mongrel's yowling for his carcase.
Mum's my best friend, the only one . . . though, whiles,
It's seemed even he had blabbered out my secrets,
And hollered them to rouse the countryside,
And draw all eyes on me. But, I must mizzle.

JUDITH: You're going, Jim?

JIM: I'll not be taken here,
Like a brock in his earth: I'll not be trapped and torn . . .
Yet, I don't know. Why should I go? No worse
To be taken here than elsewhere: and I'm dead beat:
I'm all to rovers, my wit's all gone agate:
And how can I travel in these boots? A week since
The soles bid a fond farewell to the uppers: I've been
Hirpling it, barefoot—ay, kind lady, barefoot.
You'd hardly care to be in my shoes, Judith?
While you've been sitting doose . . .

JUDITH: I've known the road:
I've trudged it, too, lad: and your feet are bleeding.
I'll bathe them for you, Jim, before you go:
And you shall have a pair of Michael's boots.

JIM: So, I may have young master's cast-off boots,
Since he's stepped into my shoes—a fair swap!
And tug my forelock, like a lousy tinker;
And whine God bless the master of this house,
Likewise the mistress, too . . . By gox, I've come
To charity—Jim Barrasford's come to mooch
For charity at Krindlesyke! Shanks's mare's
A sorry nag at best; and lets you down,

Sooner or later, for certain—the last straw,
When a man can't trust his feet, and his own legs
Give under him, in his need, and bring him down
A devasher in the ditch as the dogs are on him!
You're sorry? I don't know. How can I tell?
You're sly, you faggit; but don't get over Jim
With jookery-pawkry, Judith: I may be maiselt,
But I've a little rummelgumption left:
I still ken a bran from a brimmer—bless your heart!
It suits you to get rid of me; and you judge
It's cheaply done at the price of a pair of tackities.
Nay: I'll be taken here.

JUDITH: You cannot stay.

JIM: Do you take me for a cangling cadger, to haggle . . .
Forgimety! I cannot . . . God's truth, I dare not!
You've got me on the hop; and I must hirple;
But, if I go, I will not go alone:
I've a mind to have a partner for this polka.

JUDITH: Alone? And who do you think that . . .

JIM: Who but you?

JUDITH: I!

JIM: If I've got to take the road again,
You've got to pad it with me: for I'm tired
Of travelling lonesome: I've a mind to have
My doxy with me. By crikes! I'm fleyed to face
The road again, alone. You'll come . . .

JUDITH: I cannot.
How could I leave . . .

JIM : Then I'll be taken here :
You'll be to blame.

JUDITH : But, Jim, how could I leave . . .

JIM : The sooner it's over, the better I'll be pleased.

JUDITH : You mustn't stop : and yet, I cannot go.
How could I leave the bairn ?

JIM : The brat's asleep.

JUDITH : It won't sleep long.

JIM : Its mammy'll soon be home.

JUDITH : Not for three hours, at earliest.

JIM : Then I'll wait
Till then : they can't be on my track so soon :
And when its dad and mammy come back . . .

JUDITH : Nay, nay :
They mustn't find you here.

JIM : Judith, you're right :
For they might blab. I'd best be hooking it.
I'll go : but, mind, you're not yet shot of me.

(*As he is speaking*, BELL HAGGARD *appears in the doorway, and stands, with arms akimbo, watching them ; but* JIM *has his back to the door, and* JUDITH, *gazing into the fire, doesn't see her either.*)

JIM : I'll wait for you beneath the Gallows Rigg,
Where the burn skirts the planting, in the slack
We trysted in, in the old days—do you mind ?

JUDITH : I mind.

JIM : Trust you for that ! And I'll lie low :
It's a dry bottom : and when the family's snoring

You'll come to me. Just whicker like a peesweep
Three times, and I'll be with you in a jiffy.
We'll take the road together, bonnie lass;
For we were always marrows, you and I.
If only that flirtigig, Phœbe, hadn't come
Between me and my senses, we'd have wed,
And settled down at Krindlesyke for life:
But now we've got to hoof it to the end.
My sang! 'twill be a honeymoon for me,
After the rig I've run. But, hearken, Judith:
If you don't turn up by ten o'clock, I'll come
And batter on that door to wake the dead:
I'll make such a rumpus, such a Bob-'s-adying,
Would rouse you, if you were straked. I'll have you with me,
If I've got to carry you, chested: sink my soul!
And for all I care, that luggish slubberdegullion
May lounder my hurdies; and go to Hecklebarney!
I'm desperate, Judith . . . and I don't mind much . . .
But, you'll come, lass?

JUDITH: I'll come.

JIM: Well, if you fail,
They'll take me here, as sure as death.

BELL (*stepping forward*): That's so.

JIM (*wheeling round*): The devil!

BELL: Nay: not yet: all in good time.
But I question they'll wait till ten o'clock: they seemed
Impatient for your company, deuce kens why:
But then, what's one man's meat . . .

JIM: What's that you say?

BELL: They seemed dead-set . . . You needn't jump
like that:
I haven't got the bracelets in my pocket.
JIM: And who the hell are you? and what do you
mean?
BELL: You've seen my face before.
JIM: Ay—ay . . .
I've seen it:
But I don't ken your name. You dog my heels:
I've seen your face . . . I saw it on that night—
That night . . . and sink me, but I saw it last
In the bar at Bellingham: your eyes were on me.
Ay, and I've seen that phisgog many times:
And it always brought ill-luck.
BELL: It hasn't served
Its owner so much better: yet it's my fortune,
Though I'm no peachy milkmaid. Ay: I fancied
'Twas you they meant.
JIM: Who meant?
BELL: How should I
know?
You should ken best who's after you, and what
You're wanted for? They might be friends of
yours,
For all I ken: though I've never taken, myself,
To the little boy-blues. But, carties, I'd have fancied
'Twould make your lugs burn—such a gillaber about
you.
They talked.
JIM: Who talked?
BELL: Your friends.

JIM: Friends? I've no friends.
BELL: Well: they were none of mine. Last night I slept
'Neath Winter's Stob . . .
JIM: What's that to do with me?
BELL: I slept till midnight, when a clank of chains
Awakened me: and, looking up, I saw
A body on the gibbet . . .
JIM: A body, woman?
No man's hung there this hundred-year.
BELL: I saw
A tattered corpse against the hagging moon,
Above me black.
JIM: You didn't see the face?
BELL: I saw its face—before it disappeared,
And left the gibbet bare.
JIM: You kenned the face?
BELL: I kenned the face.
JIM: Whose face? . . .
BELL: Best not to ask.
JIM: O Christ!
BELL: But we were talking of your friends:
Quite anxious about you, they seemed.
JIM (*limping towards* BELL HAGGARD *with lifted arm*): You cadger-quean!
You've set them on. I'll crack you over the cruntle—
You rummel-dusty . . . You muckhut . . . You windyhash!

I'll slit your weazen for you: I'll break your jaw—
I'll stop your gob, if I've to do you in!
You'll not sleep under Winter's Stob to-night.
BELL (*regarding him, unmoved*): As well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb?
JIM (*stopping short*): Hanged?
BELL: To be hanged by the neck till you are dead.
That bleaches you? But you'll look whiter yet,
When you lie cold and stiffening, my pretty bleater.
JIM (*shrinking back*): You witch . . . You witch! You've got the evil eye.
Don't look at me like that . . . Come, let me go!
BELL: A witch? Ay, wise men always carry witch-bane
When they've to do with women. Witch, say you?
Eh, lad, but you've been walking widdershins:
You'd best turn deazil, crook your thumbs, my callant,
And gather cowgrass, if you'd break the spell,
And send the old witch skiting on her broomstick.
They said that you'd make tracks for Krindlesyke:
And they'd cop you here, for certain—dig you out
Like a badger from his earth. I left them talking.
JIM: Where, you hell-hag?
BELL: Ah, where? You'd like to learn?
It's well to keep a civil tongue with witches,
If you've no sliver of rowan in your pocket:
Though it won't need any witch, my jackadandy,
To clap the clicking jimmies round your wrists.

To think I fashed myself to give you warning:
And this is all the thanks I get! Well, well—
They'll soon be here. As I came up Bloodysyke . . .
JIM: Up Bloodysyke: and they were following?
I'd best cut over Gallows Rigg. My God,
The hunt's afoot . . . But it may be a trap—
And you . . . And you . . .
BELL: Nay: but I'm no ratcatcher.
You'd best turn tail, before the terriers sight you.
(*As* JIM *bolts past her and through the open door*)
Rats! Rats! Good dog! . . . And now we're rid of vermin.
JUDITH: Oh, Bell, what has he done? What has he done?
BELL: How should I ken?
JUDITH: And yet you said . . .
BELL: I said?
You've surely not forgotten Bell Haggard's tongue,
After the taste you had of it the last time?
JUDITH: What did you hear?
BELL: A drunken blether-breeks
In a bar at Bellingham: and I recognized
Peter's own brother, too; and guessed 'twas Jim:
And when they gossiped of Krindlesyke . . . Oh, I ken
Ladies don't listen: but not being a lady
Whiles has advantages: and when he left
His crony sprawling, splurging in the gutter,
I followed him, full-pelt, hot on his heel,

Guessing the hanniel was up to little good.
But he got here before me: so I waited
Outside, until I heard him blustering;
And judged it time to choke his cracking-croose.
I couldn't have that wastrel making mischief
In Michael's house: I didn't quit Krindlesyke
That it might be turned into a tinker's dosshouse,
Hotching with maggots like a reesty gowdy,
For any hammy, halfnabs, and hang-gallows
To stretch his lousy carcase in at ease,
After I'd slutted to keep it respectable
For fifteen-year.

JUDITH: But what do you think he's done—
Not murder?

BELL: Murder? Nay: it takes a man
To murder.

JUDITH: Ay . . . But when you spoke of hanging,
He turned like death: and when he threatened you,
I saw blue-murder in his eyes.

BELL: At most,
'Twould be manslaughter with the likes of him.
I've some respect for murderers: they, at least,
Take things into their own hands, and don't wait
On lucky chances, like the rest of us—
Murderers and suicides . . .

JUDITH: But Jim?

BELL: I'd back
Cain against Abel, ay, and hairy Esau
Against that smooth sneak Jacob. Jim? He's likely
Done in some doxy in a drunken sleep:
'Twould be about his measure.

JUDITH: Jim—O Jim!
BELL: Nay: he'll not dangle in a hempen noose.
JUDITH: And yet you saw his body . . .
BELL: Dead men's knuckles!
You didn't swallow that gammon? Why should I
Be sleeping under Winter's Stob? But Jim—
I doubt if he'd the guts to stick a porker:
You needn't fear for him. But I must go.
JUDITH: Go? You'll not go without a sup of tea,
After you've traiked so far? Michael and Ruth . . .
BELL: Ay, Judith: I just caught a squint of them
Among the cluther outside the circus-tent:
But I was full-tilt on Jim's track, then: and so,
I couldn't daunder: or I'd have stopped to have
A closer look: yet I saw that each was carrying
A little image of a Barrasford:
(*Looking into the cradle.*)
And here's the reckling image, seemingly—
The sleeping spit of Michael at the age.
JUDITH: You never saw such laleeking lads: and they
All fashion after their father.
BELL: I'm glad I came.
Even if I'd not struck Jim, I'd meant to come,
And have a prowl round the old gaol, and see
How Michael throve: although I hadn't ettled
To cross the doorstone—just to come and go,
And not a soul the wiser. But it turns out
I was fated to get here in the nick of time:
It seems the old witch drew me here once more
To serve her turn and save the happy home.

I judged you'd lost your hold on me, Eliza:
But, once a ghost has got a grip of you,
It won't let go its clutch on your life until
It's dragged you into the grave with it: even then . . .
Although my ghost should prove a match for any,
I'd fancy, with a fair field, and no favour.
But ghosts and graves! I'm down-in-the-mouth to-day:
I must have supped off toadstools on a tombstone,
Or happen the droppy weather makes me dyvous:
I never could thole the mooth and muggy mizzle,
Seeping me sodden: I'd liefer it teemed wholewater,
A sousing, drooking downpour, any time.
I'm dowf and blunkit, why, deuce only kens!
It seems as if Eliza had me fey:
And that old witch would be the death of me:
And these white walls . . . 'Twould be the queerest start!
But, Michael's happy?

JUDITH: He's the best of husbands—
The best of fathers: he . . .

BELL: I ken, I ken.
Well . . . He's got what he wanted, anyway.

JUDITH: And you?

BELL: Ay . . . I was born to take my luck.
But I must go.

JUDITH: You'll not wait for them?

BELL: Nay:
I'm dead to them: I've bid good-bye to them
Till doomsday: and I'm through with Krindlesyke,

This time, I hope—though you can never tell.
I hadn't ettled to darken the door again ;
Yet here I am : and even now the walls
Seem closing . . . It would be the queerest start
If, after all . . . But, dod, I've got the dismals,
And no mistake ! I'm in the dowie dumps—
Maundering and moonging like a spancelled cow :
It's over dour and dearn for me in this loaning
On a dowly day. Best pull myself together,
And put my best foot foremost before darkening :
And I've no mind to meet them in the road.
So long !

(*She goes out of the door and makes down the syke.*)

JUDITH : Good-bye ! If you'd only bide a while . . .
Come back ! You mustn't go like that . . . Bell,
Bell !

(*She breaks off, as* BELL HAGGARD *is already out of hearing, and stands watching her till she is out of sight ; then turns, closing the door, and sinks into a chair in an abstracted fashion. She takes up her knitting mechanically, but sits, motionless, brooding by the fire.*)

JUDITH : To think that Jim—and after all these years . . .
And then, to come like that ! I wonder what . . .
I wish he hadn't gone without the boots.

(*She resumes her knitting, musing in silence, until she is roused by the click of the latch. The door opens, and* BELL HAGGARD *stumbles into*

the room and sinks to the floor in a heap. Her brow is bleeding, and her dress, torn and dishevelled.)

JUDITH (*starting up*): Bell! What has happened, woman? Are you hurt?
Oh, but your brow is bleeding!

BELL: I'd an inkling
There must be blood somewhere: I seemed to smell it.

JUDITH: But what has happened, Bell? Don't say 'twas Jim!

BELL: Nay . . . nay . . . it wasn't Jim . . . I stumbled, Judith:
And, seemingly, I cracked my cruntle a bit—
It's Jill fell down, and cracked her crown, this journey.
I smelt the blood . . . but, it's not there, the pain . . .
It's in my side . . . I must have dunched my side
Against a stone in falling . . . I could fancy
A rib or so's gone smash.

JUDITH (*putting an arm about her and helping her to rise*): Come and lie down,
And I'll see what . . .

BELL: Nay: but I'll not lie down:
I'm not that bad . . . and, anyhow, I swore
I'd not lie down again at Krindlesyke.
If I lay down, the walls would close on me,
And scrunch the life out . . . But I'm havering—
Craitching and craking like a doitered crone.
Lightheaded from the tumble . . . mother-wit's
Jirbled and jumbled . . . I came such a flam.
I'm not that bad . . . I say, I'll not lie down . . .

Just let me rest a moment by the hearth,
Until . . .

(JUDITH *leads her to a chair, fetches a basin of water and some linen, and bathes the wound on* BELL'S *brow.*)

JUDITH: I wish . . .

BELL: I'm better here. I'll soon
Be fit again . . . Bell isn't done for, yet:
She's a tough customer—she's always been
A banging, bobberous bletherskite, has Bell—
No fushenless, brashy, mim-mouthed mealy-face,
Fratished and perished in the howl-o'-winter.
No wind has ever blown too etherish,
Too snell to fire her blood: she's always relished
A gorly, gousty, blusterous day that sets
Her body alow and birselling like a whinfire.
But what a windyhash! My wit's wool-gathering;
And I'm waffling like a . . . But I'd best be stepping,
Before he comes: I've far to travel to-night:
And I'm not so young . . . And Michael mustn't find
His tinker-mother, squatted by the hearth,
Nursing a bloody head. But, mind you, Judith:
I stumbled; and I hurt my side in falling:
Whatever they may say, you stick to that:
Swear that I told you that upon my oath—
So help me God, and all—my bible-oath.
I'm better . . . already . . . I fancy . . . and I'll go
Before . . . What was I saying? Well, old hob,
I little ettled I'd look on you again.
The times I've polished you, the elbow-grease
I've wasted on you: but I never made

You shine like that . . . You're winking red eyes
at me:
And well you may, to see . . . I little guessed
You'd see me sitting . . . I've watched many fires
Since last I sat beside this hearth—good fires:
Coal, coke, and peat, but wood-fires in the main.
There's naught like izles for dancing flames and singing:
Birch kindles best, and has the liveliest flames:
But elm just smoulders—it's the coffin-wood . . .
Coffins? Who muttered coffins? Let's not talk
Of coffins, Judith . . . Shut in a black box!
They couldn't keep old Ezra in: the lid
Flew off; and old granddaddy sat up, girning . . .
They had to screw him down . . . And Solomon
Slept with his fathers . . . I wonder he could sleep,
After the razzle-dazzle . . . Concubines!
'Twould take a pyramid to keep him down!
And me . . . That tumble's cracked the bell . . .
not stopt
The crazy clapper, seemingly . . . But, coffins—
Let's talk no more of coffins: what have I
To do with coffins? Let us talk of fires:
I've always loved a fire: I'd set the world
Alow for my delight, if it would burn.
It's such a soggy, sodden world to-day,
I'm duberous I could kindle it with an izle:
It might just smoulder with muckle funeral-plumes
Of smoke, like coffin-elder . . . And the blaze—
The biggest flare-up ever I set eyes on,
It was a kind of funeral, you might say—
A fiery, flaming, roaring funeral,

A funeral such as I . . . but no such luck
For me in this world—likely, in the next!
And anyway, it wouldn't be much fun,
If I couldn't watch it, myself . . . Ay, Long Nick Salkeld,
And his old woman, Zillah, died together,
The selfsame day, within an hour or so.
'Twas on Spadeadam Waste we'd camped that time . . .
And kenning how they loved their caravan,
And how they'd hate to leave it, or be parted
From one another, even by a foot of earth,
We laid them out, together, side by side,
In the van, as they'd slept in it, night after night,
For hard on fifty-year. We took naught out,
And shifted naught: just burnished up the brasses,
Till they twinkled as Zillah'd kept them, while she could . . .
And so, with not a coffin-board betwixt them,
At dead of night we fired the caravan . . .
The flames leapt up; and roaring to the stars,
As we stood round . . . The flames leapt up, and roaring . . .
I hear them roaring now . . . the flames . . . I hear . . .
Flames roaring in my head . . . I hear . . . I hear . . .
And flying izles . . . falling sparks . . . I hear
Flames roaring . . . roaring . . . roaring . . .

(*She sways forward, but* JUDITH *catches her in her arms.*)

Where am I? Judith, is that you?
How did I come here, honey? But, now I mind—
I fell . . . He must have hidden in the heather

To trip me up . . . He kicked me, as I lay—
The harrygad!

JUDITH: Jim!

BELL: Nay! What am I saying?
I stumbled, Judith: you must stick to that,
Whatever they may say . . . I stumbled, Judith.
Think what would happen if they strung Jim up;
Should I . . . you can't hang any man alone . . .
Think what would happen should I . . . Don't you see,
We cannot let them string up Michael's uncle?
Respectable . . . it wouldn't be respectable . . .
And I . . . I slutted, fifteen . . . I'd an inkling
There must be blood, somewhere . . . I thought I smelt it . . .
And it tastes salt on the lips . . . It's choking me . . .
It's fire and salt and candle-light for me
This time, and Whinny Muir and Brig-o'-Dread . . .
I'm done for, Judith . . . It's all up with me . . .
It's been a fine ploy, while it lasted . . .

JUDITH: Come . . .

BELL: Life with a smack in it: death with a tang . . .

JUDITH: I'll help you into bed.

(BELL HAGGARD *gazes about her in a dazed fashion, as* JUDITH *raises her and supports her across the floor towards the inner room.*)

BELL: Bed, did you say?
Bed, it's not bedtime, is it? To bed, to bed,
Says Sleepyhead: tarry awhile, says Slow:
Put on the pot, says Greedygut . . . I swore
I'd not lie down . . . You cannot dodge your luck:
It had to be . . . And I must dree my weird.

When first I came to Krindlesyke, I felt
These walls . . . these walls . . . They're closing on me now!
Let's sup before we go!

(*They pass into the other room, but* Bell Haggard's *voice still sounds through the open door.*)

Bell: Nay! not that bed—
Eliza's bed! The old witch lay in wait
For me . . . and now she has me! Well, what odds?
Jim called me witch: and the old spaewife and I
Should be the doose bedfellows, after all.
Early to bed and early to rise . . . I've never
Turned in, while I could wink an eye, before:
I've always sat late . . . And I'd sit it out
Now . . . But I'm dizzy . . . And that old witch, Eliza—
I little guessed she'd play this cantrip on me:
But what a jest—Jerusalem, what a jest!
She must be chuckling, thinking how she's done me:
And I could laugh, if it wasn't for the pain . . .
It doesn't do to rattle broken ribs—
But I could die of laughing, split my sides,
If they weren't split already. Yet my clapper
Keeps wagging: and I'm my own passing-bell—
They knew, who named me . . . Talking to gain time . . .
It's running out so quick . . . And mum's the word:
I mustn't rouse her . . . She sleeps couthily,
Free of the coil of cumber and trouble . . . I never

Looked on a lonelier face . . . The flames . . . the flames . . .

They're roaring to the stars . . . roaring . . . roaring . . .

The heather's all turned gold . . . and golden showers—

Izles and flying embers and falling stars . . .

Great flakes of fire . . . They've set the world alow . . .

It's all about me . . . blood-red in my eyes . . .

I'm burning . . . What have I to do with worms!

Burning . . . burning . . . burning . . .

(*Her voice sinks to a low moaning, which goes on for some time, then stops abruptly. After a while,* JUDITH *comes into the living-room, fills a basin of water from a bucket, and carries it into the other room. She returns with* BELL'S *orange-coloured kerchief, which she throws on the fire, where it burns to a grey wisp. She then takes a nightdress and a white mutch from a drawer in the dresser, and carries them into the other room, where she stays for some time. The baby in the cradle wakens, and begins to whimper till* JUDITH *comes out, shutting the door behind her, and takes it in her arms.*)

JUDITH: Whisht, whisht, my canny hinny, my bonnie boy!

Your wee warm body's good to cuddle after . . .

Whisht, whisht! (*Gazing in the fire.*)

First, Phœbe—and then, Bell . . . Oh, Jim!

Steps are heard on the threshold, and MICHAEL *and* RUTH *enter, carrying their sleeping sons,* NICHOLAS, *aged five, and* RALPH, *aged three. They put down the children on the settle by the hearth, where they sit, dazed and silent, sleepily rubbing their eyes.*

RUTH: Well, I'm not sorry to be home again:
My arms are fairly broken.
MICHAEL: Ay: they're heavy.
The hoggerel you lift up turns a sheep
Before you set it down again. Well, Judith,
You've had a quiet day of it, I warrant?
JUDITH (*in a low voice*): Michael, your mother's here.
MICHAEL: My mother here?
RUTH: I always fancied she'd turn up again,
In spite of all her raivelling—Michael, you mind,
About the mutch with frills, and all thon havers?
But where we are to put her I can't think:
There's not a bed for her.
JUDITH: She's on my bed.
RUTH: Your bed? But you . . .
JUDITH: She's welcome to my bed,
As long as she has need. She'll not lie long,
Before they lift her.
MICHAEL: Judith!
RUTH: She's not dead?
JUDITH: Ay, son: she breathed her last an hour ago.
RUTH: So, after all, the poor old soul crept back
To Krindlesyke to die.

(MICHAEL BARRASFORD, *without a word, moves towards the inner room in a dazed manner, lifts the latch, and goes in. After a moment's hesitation,* RUTH *follows him, closing the door behind her. The boys, who have been sitting staring at the fire, drowsily and unheeding, rouse themselves gradually, stretching and yawning.*)

NICHOLAS: Grannie, we saw the circus:
And Ralph still says he wants to be a herd,
Like dad: but I can't bide the silly baas.
When I'm a man I'll be a circus-rider,
And gallop, gallop! I'm clean daft on horses.

(*An owl hoots piercingly without.*)

RALPH: Grannie, what's that?

JUDITH: Only an owl, son.

NICHOLAS: Bo!
Fearent of hoolets!

RALPH: I thought it was a bo-lo.

NICHOLAS: Bo-los or horneys or wirrakows can't scare me:
And I like to hear the jinneyhoolets scritching:
It gives me such a queer, cold, creepy feeling.
I like to feel the shivers in my hair.
When I'm a man I'll ride the fells by moonlight,
Like the mosstroopers, when the owls are skirling.
They used to gallop on their galloways,
The reivers, dad says . . .

(*The owl calls again, and is answered by its mate; and then they seem to be flying round and round Krindlesyke, hooting shrilly.*)

RALPH: Oh, there it is again!
Grannie, I'm freckened . . .
JUDITH: It's an ellerish yelling:
I never heard . . .
RALPH: What's in the other room?
I want my dad and mammy.
JUDITH: You're overtired.
Come, I'll undress you, and tuck you into bed:
And you'll sleep sound, my lamb, as sound and snug
As a yeanling in a maud-neuk.
NICHOLAS: I'll ride! I'll ride!

EPILOGUE

Ghosts of my fathers, where you keep
On ghostly hills your ghostly sheep,
Should you a moment chance to turn
The pages of this book to learn
What trade your offspring's taken to,
Because my exiled heart is true
To your Northumbrian fells and you,
Forgive me that my flocks and herds
Are only barren bleating words.

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